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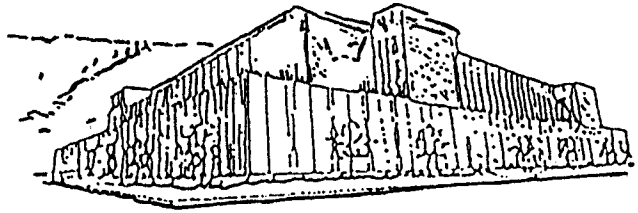
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Consolation

by

Deborah Siegel

B.A., Macalester College, 1996

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

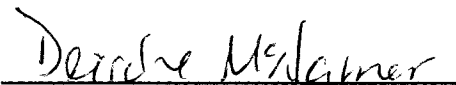
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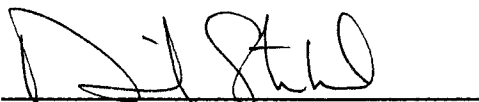
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Consolation



stories and other useful things by

Deborah Siegel

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The First Death

Like cats, we all have nine lives. The first death is the hardest.

The whole fair had a kind of desperate, squalid air, as if someone had forgotten to scrub everything properly since the last time it had been used. The fair wasn't much, mostly rides that twirl you around in circles and stop just before you vomit. Leah and I had both been working the day shift at the video store so it was early evening by the time we got to the fairgrounds, and most of the families with kids were leaving. Leah had been so enthusiastic I agreed to go with her, even though I had never gone in much for flashing lights and whirling rides. We wandered by the Zipper and the Gravitron, but what interested Leah was the fortune-teller's tent—a garish, gold and red affair that, like the rest of the equipment, had seen better days. I said okay, she could get her fortune told, if I could get my face painted first.

"We'll both get our faces done," Leah said, "and then we'll both get our fortunes."

I wasn't thrilled about the prospect—I figured what I don't know can't hurt me. But Leah seemed so intent on it, I went along. First we got our faces painted by the resident artist, a wispy girl not more than fourteen. She was wearing a black beret pulled tight over white-blonde hair, and she had a curious way of screwing up her mouth when she concentrated on painting the red balloon on my cheek; she looked like she was about to cry.

"Are you all right?" I asked her.

"Oh don't move!" Her voice came out in a squeak. "Damn," she said, wiping at my face with a wet paper towel, "that doesn't look like a balloon."

"It's okay," I said, standing up and handing her my two dollars, "it doesn't matter, I'm sure it's fine, why don't you do Leah now."

After Leah got her rainbow painted, we walked over to the fortune-teller's tent. There was no one around, so we lifted up the tent flap and looked inside. We found the requisite card table and two chairs set up on opposite sides, but no fortune-teller. When we walked out, we saw the artist-girl running towards us, pulling her beret off her head. She ran up to the tent and through the flap, and emerged a few seconds later with a flowered scarf on her head.

"Come in, come in" she motioned us with a sweep her arm that looked too adult for her, and we followed her into the tent. "Sorry about that," she said, sitting in the far chair "the face-painter is sick today, and I'm filling in."

"So you're really the fortune-teller?" I asked, as Leah sat in the other chair.

"Yeah, I'm a palm reader, actually. You left- or right- handed?" she said to Leah.

"Right" Leah said, reaching across the table, palm up. The girl rubbed her fingers over Leah's hand, smoothing the skin so the lines stood out clearly.

"You've got a long life line," she said. "So that's good. But your heart line, mmm, that's not so good. Well, later, maybe, it'll get better. See how it gets forked there, at the end? That means you'll have lots of love in the end of your life." The girl screwed up her mouth again and bent so far over Leah's palm that her nose almost touched the heart line. "But right now-I can't figure out what's going on with it. Something's weird." Leah started, like she'd just

thought of something, and glanced at me. I shrugged. The girl looked up from Leah's palm, her eyes opened too wide. "Just be careful, OK?" she said. "You'll have to follow your heart, but it may take you to places you don't want to go."

This was all becoming a little bit too new age for me, so I cleared my throat and started for the exit as soon as Leah stood up. Leah grabbed me by the wrist.

"No, it's your turn," she said.

"Yes," said the fortune teller, "please stay. You look like someone who could use a palm reading." What that meant I couldn't tell. "I'll give you half off."

"You can't refuse an offer like that," Leah decided for me, and I sat in the folding chair and put my hand on the table. The girl took my hand and smoothed the skin on my palm, just as she had done to Leah. Then she looked at the palm closely and froze, dead still. She bent low over my palm, then straightened up, tilting my hand from side to side to catch the light. Then she looked up at my face.

"How old are you?" she asked.

"Nineteen," I told her. "Why?"

"Well, you're..." she took my left hand and examined that too. Then she slumped back in her chair and looked at me sadly. "You're dead," she said quietly.

"Excuse me?"

"The thing is, your life line stops at sixteen." She leaned towards me, her pupils dilating to fill her pale blue irises. "So, I mean, really, you're dead." She

paused, chewing on her upper lip seriously. "You've got to do something about this."

"Look," I said, standing up, trying to be very businesslike, "I'm obviously alive, so there's nothing to worry about. I'll just pay you—" I started to reach in my pocket.

"No!" she said loudly, standing up as well. "This isn't a game."

"I know," I told her, "I know it's not a game. I understand." I looked her straight in the eye as I said this and from the way she looked back at me I knew she understood that I understood. Because I did understand, I knew what had happened when I was sixteen to make me that way. Dead, I mean.

The truth is that when I was a sophomore in high school I had been stupid and gone to a New Year's Eve party my friend Rhonda's cousin Phil was having. Rhonda was a year older than me, and she insisted that the way to be popular and happy in high school was to go to parties and get drunk with all the cool people. Her cousin Phil was a big hockey player with tons of friends, and when his parents went away on vacations, he threw parties at his house. Rhonda wasn't exactly invited, but she knew about the party and said Phil wouldn't care if we came. I stuffed my only fancy dress, which was black and so tight my father said it was an abomination, into my backpack and told my mother I was going to sleep over at Rhonda's.

"Don't stay up late and make lots of noise and run around the neighborhood and get yourself in trouble," my mother said.

"I won't," I told her as I put on my jeans jacket, "we're just going to watch a movie."

"Don't wear that jacket," my mother said. "It's not appropriate for winter."

"But it's not that cold," I told her, "It's practically thirty."

"That's not the issue," my mother said, opening the coat closet and taking out my gray wool coat. I took my backpack and jacket and struggled my arms into the sleeves of the coat as my mother held it up for me.

"There," she said, straightening the collar, "Much more respectable." She smoothed down my hair and kissed me on the cheek. "Have fun. Don't stay up all night."

When I got to Rhonda's she was already dressed in a purple leather miniskirt and black tank top. "Your parents going to let you go out like that?" I whispered when she answered the door.

"They're already gone," she said, "come on in." We went up to Rhonda's room and she put on eyeliner while I changed.

"I can't believe your parents let you buy that dress," Rhonda said, appraising me. "They're always so worried that you look proper and shit."

"I got it on sale" I told her, "I couldn't take it back."

"Look what I've got," Rhonda took a bottle of vodka out from under her bed. "My parents never keep the liquor cabinet locked anymore, since Luke went to college. They think I'm too dumb to even know what alcohol is."

I had never drunk anything except one beer at the last party I went to with Rhonda. I didn't like the way it tasted and didn't want to drink anymore, but Rhonda drank four and said it made her feel like her head was

disconnected from her body. Rhonda said I'd have to learn to drink if I wanted to get through high school.

She drank from the bottle and then handed it to me. "Just take four big gulps and you'll be there. It'll be like drinking four beers but faster. "

I took the bottle and tipped it up. I took one big gulp before my eyes started watering and my nose burned. I put the bottle down. "It's awful," I told her. She looked at me with her "you're a dork" look so I tipped the bottle back and drank again.

"We're not going to the party until you're buzzed," she said, putting on orange blossom perfume. I took one last big drink, and set the bottle on the floor with a crash.

"I'm drunk," I told her, and she laughed.

"It takes a while," she said.

It didn't take too long. By the time we walked over to Phil's my head felt like it was farther away from my feet than I remembered, and when someone offered me a beer I took it and found it didn't taste so bad anymore. I was on my fifth beer when a friend of Phil's asked me to dance, and I don't remember anything more except the feeling of his hands warm on my back and the cigarette tang when he kissed me. Heavy metal was playing and my body was moving but my mind wasn't. I remember a darkness then a light and a darkness again. I woke up in the morning on the couch in the basement of Phil's house. My eyes hurt and my stomach felt empty and out of shape. I got up and found my dress on the floor. I turned it right-side out and as I put it on I noticed a line of dried blood on my thigh. I wet my fingers in my mouth and rubbed off the spot. My watch said it 7 a.m. I couldn't find my shoes so I

walked home gingerly in my bare feet. By the time I got home my feet were yellow with cold but I didn't mind because the numbness in my legs took my mind off the tightness in my head and the sticky feeling of dread rising in my throat. I went upstairs to my room and put on two pairs of wool socks, climbed into bed. I tried to sleep but when I closed my eyes I felt like I was falling into the ocean. Rhonda called later.

"What happened to you?" she asked. "You disappeared with that guy and I couldn't find you."

"I'm not exactly sure" I told her, "but I don't think it was good."

"Did you guys, you know, do anything?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I don't remember."

"Well, you'd remember *that*," she said. "I mean, if you guys did anything, so don't worry about it."

I didn't get my period the next month, or the next. Rhonda said she knew a good place to get an abortion but I figured I'd had enough of advice from Rhonda. I thought about running away but I didn't know where to go, and when I went to see the school nurse she gave me a bunch of pamphlets and told me to read them. The top pamphlet had a picture of an aborted fetus. After throwing up in the toilet I threw the pamphlets in the wastebasket and went home to talk to my mother. When she heard what I had to say, she told me to go to my room and stay there.

All that evening I heard my parents discussing me in low, angry tones, just loud enough so I could hear.

"She's got to have an abortion," my mother was saying.

I heard a crash, like my father had smashed his fist against something. “Not in my house,” he told her, “not in my house will we knowingly take a life.”

“It will ruin *her* life,” my mother said, “she’s only fifteen. What will people think of the way we raised our daughter?”

“I don’t care what people think,” my father said, “I will not let my daughter burn in hell.” I could see the vein in his forehead bulging, like it always did when he talked about religion. I guess that’s all you need to know about my parents right there: my father feared the wrath of God, my mother feared the disapproval of her friends. I was afraid of either option.

Finally, my parents compromised. They decided I should have the baby but give it up for adoption. They marched up to my room and told me the news. I nodded, kept my mouth shut. I thought maybe if I pretended it was all happening to somebody else, I wouldn’t feel it so much.

When I lay in bed at night I thought of names for my baby, even though I knew I wouldn’t get to name her. I decided on Isobel, a beautiful and strong name.

In the hospital they took the baby away from me before I could see her. I knew it was a girl, even though no one would confirm it. I hadn’t lived with her for eight months and three days not to know what her gender was. They do it that way so you don’t get attached, but I was already attached, and I know if I could have seen her, just once, that part of me wouldn’t be dead.

Leah wanted to know what I was thinking about and I told her that I wasn’t thinking about anything. She wanted to know what I wanted to do and I told her I wanted to go home and go to bed.

"Is Jesse working tonight?" she asked. I shrugged. "You're not worried about what your palm said, are you?"

"No," I said, "I'm not worried about it."

I lied, of course. I went home that night and lay down in bed, fully dressed, replaying over and over what had happened to make me dead. How, as I lay in that white and yellow hospital room, I missed my daughter so much I could feel it all through my body, like my insides had been sucked out with a vacuum cleaner. I'd felt like there was nothing left inside of me, and I'd been so angry at myself for letting it happen without putting up a fight I barely had room in my brain for thoughts except that anger. I told my parents I was leaving school, leaving town, as soon as I could, and they couldn't stop me. They were angry and scared and told me I was being stupid and I told them that wasn't new for me, being stupid, and you got used to it after a while. I did leave, about two weeks later. I didn't get far away from Richfield, just halfway across the state, but it was enough to make me feel like I'd made some progress, like I'd left my hated self behind.

I had hitchhiked down to near the Twin Cities and stayed with another one of Rhonda's cousins on their farm until I found a job working at the video store in St. Paul and met Jesse and moved in with him within the month. It was a lot easier than I thought it would be, the whole situation. I found out later that Jesse had just gotten out of a four-year relationship days before he hired me. He was looking for someone to fill the left side of his bed and I was looking for a place to sleep. He was five years older than me--he said he wanted to take care of me. I felt in need of protection, and he protected me, but now I was starting to wonder what I was being protected from.

I must have fallen asleep before Jesse got home because when I woke I was surprised to see him sitting on the edge of the bed, watching me. "You slept for a long time," he told me, "you must have been tired. You fell asleep in your clothes? Are you sick?"

"No, I was just tired," I said, looking at the clock. It was 1 p.m.

"I'm sorry, I have to go to work soon," he said "but I didn't want to wake you."

"That's okay," I said.

"I probably won't be home for a while. I have to go check on some stores out in the sticks. Are you going to be okay." He was pulling on his boots.

"Yup."

"I'll see you later then, okay? I love you."

"Do you really love me?" I asked, sitting up. What I really meant was, will you love me no matter what I've done? Will you love me forever?

"Sure," he said, and then he was gone.

My brain felt foggy, and I moved around the apartment slowly, trying to shake it off. I looked in the refrigerator and found a bit of moldy cheddar cheese and half a cinnamon raisin bagel.

When I got back from the grocery store the message light on the answering machine was blinking. I pressed the play button and was rewarded with the sound of my mother's voice. Since she found out my phone number, from Rhonda's cousin, probably, she's been calling me every other day. I can't

deal with her—I have nothing to say to her. I just want to forget that period in my past, pretend that my life started when I came to St. Paul.

“Shana, are you at work?” the message said. “You know how I feel about you working at night. The store may be a very respectable place, I can’t say for sure, but even so—” I fast forwarded to the next message. It was blank. Then came a message that sounded like radio static and then suddenly, as if a station had been found, music playing loudly and clearly. “Hit the road, Jack,” the message was playing, “and dontcha come back no more no more no more no more. Hit the road, Jack, and dontcha come back no more.” I sat and listened to the whole song and when it was over I hit replay and listened again. A hole opened up inside of me as I listened, a little space of sadness and hope, and I figured if it wasn’t a sign from somebody, or something, I didn’t know what was. I erased the messages and started putting clothes in my backpack. When you’re going on a trip and you’re not sure where to, it’s wise to take only what you can carry on your back. Otherwise you may find yourself trudging along a dirt road somewhere, dropping first the suitcase in the left hand, then the suitcase in the right, continuing on, empty-handed till you finally get where you’re going, and Rhonda’s cousin Cheryl has to drive back in her pick-up truck to pick up your suitcases . Not that I know from experience or anything.

I packed some clothes, shoes, my checkbook. I’d saved almost all the money I’d made in the last year working at the video store, so I figured I should be okay for a while, until I found a new job. I hadn’t been thinking realistically until I sat down to write a note to Jesse. He was the only thing I’d felt any connection to lately, and in that moment of leaving I couldn’t even find that connection anymore. I thought about the first time we’d had sex, how important

it felt not to show him how little it mattered to me. It was important to appear innocent, in need of protection, and then he would protect me. It was important not to show desire, so I bit my lip to keep it inside. "You're quiet," he'd whispered in my ear, "I like that." I said nothing. Thinking about Jesse had made me wonder if he knew me at all, if I knew him.

"Dear Jesse," I wrote, "I'm really sorry, I have to go away for a while. I'm not sure where I'm going, but don't worry, I'll be fine. Thanks for taking me in when I needed help. I'm not sure when I'll be back." It wasn't enough, but I didn't know what else to say. I got out my bus map and looked to see how far I could get and still be in the Twin Cities. It wasn't physical distance I was looking for. Just across the river was Minneapolis, a whole new town. I got on the number four bus and transferred to the 94 express and let it take me wherever it was going. When I got off I was in the low-rent, hi-rise part of Minneapolis, instead of staid and tree-lined St. Paul. I hadn't spent much time in Minneapolis, but it felt seedier to me, harder edged.

The first "apt. for rent" sign I saw was in a old brick building with crumbling front steps. I tripped up the steps and knocked on the caretaker's door. A man in dusty black jeans and a green tank-top answered.

"Yeah?" he said.

"You have an apartment for rent?"

"Yeah," he said. "A studio. Four hundred a month plus one hundred deposit."

"Okay," I said. There was a long pause.

"Where's the money?" he finally asked.

“Where’s the apartment?” I asked.

He nodded in agreement and took me down the hallway and up three flights. The studio was at the top of the building, almost an attic, but well-lit with one large window facing the street. It had unfinished dark wood floors and yellowing white walls. The man opened the closet in the middle of the back wall.

“Murphy bed.” He said, as the frame hit the floor with a bang, and the mattress bounced twice, then lay still. “Gotta watch out for it.”

“I will.” At least I wouldn’t be sleeping on the floor.

“The rent?” he asked.

“What about the lease?”

“Yeah,” he said, leading me back to his place. “Month to month. You pay on the first of the month or you’re outta here.” In his apartment he found what looked like a lease and I signed. Then I wrote a check for five hundred dollars. “My name’s Jerry,” he told me as I left. “You got any problems, you tell somebody else. Ha.” He laughed, his teeth the color of coffee.

I didn’t have a very good night. No matter how grateful the apartment had a bed, I couldn’t ignore its lumps long enough to fall asleep. Or maybe I was just worrying about what I was doing in Minneapolis, what kind of weird fever had brought me there . By the time dawn rolled around and light slanted in my one window, I decided this move had something to do with children, or the lack thereof. I hadn’t been in close quarters with any little kids since I left Richfield, although I used to baby-sit all the time before I left home. There had to be a lot of single parents in the area, I figured, and cheap child care would solve everyone’s problems at once. My first task was to find a store nearby

where I bought paper, colored pens, and tape. Once I'd advertised my child care services around the neighborhood, and walked around and approached tired-looking parents watching their children in the park, I sat back and waited for them to come to my door. I figured a dollar-an-hour was a price any single parent could pay, and would pay, to let someone else watch their kids for a while. I had a lot of love, I thought, and just needed someone to give it to.

I had to wait three days for my first customer. Those were the most mind-deadening three days of my whole life. I even discovered that, as much as I hated hearing my mother's voice, I hated not having a phone and not being able to hate hearing her voice even more. Finally, on Saturday, I heard a knock at my door. I opened it to find a little boy in a gray sweatshirt and blue jeans. "Hi," I said, looking down the stairs for an adult, "where's your mom?"

"I got the money," he said, handing me four crumpled one-dollar bills.

"Four dollars. For four hours, huh?"

He was an annoying kid, but we had a great afternoon. He was one of those kids who cheerfully does exactly what he's not supposed to do. The first thing we did was go to the park. When we got there he asked: "can I take my shoes off?"

"No," I said, "leave your shoes on so you don't step on something and hurt your feet."

"Okay," he said, and went off to play on the swings. A minute later he came back and sat down on the ground beside me. He looked up at me, with an angelic smile. "Shana, guess what? I'm taking my shoes off!" He took them off and I put them back on for him. Then when played in the sandbox for a while. He took his shoes off again, I put them back on. He also threw sand and tried

to eat the shovel. It went on like that, and when it was time for him to go home he was sad to leave and I was a bit sorry to see him go. It was satisfying to have someone else to worry about, someone to take care of.

“I’ll come back tomorrow,” Carson said, “if my mom lets me.”

“Okay,” I told him, “tell everybody how much fun we had.”

Carson was my only client for a few days, and I was just beginning to panic when a woman with dark hair shorn to a buzz knocked on my door, little girl on her back. She handed me a ten.

“I heard you were good with Carson,” she said. “Although I’m not sure I should trust you. You’re not charging enough. “ She bent down and the girl slipped off her back. “This is Angel. Children are a gift.”

I had more and more kids after that, most of whose parents said they’d heard of me from Carson or Angel, and we all got along well those next couple of months. We went to the park, finger-painted all over my walls, baked chocolate chip cookies. I made just enough money to cover the rent each month, although I had to deplete my saving for other expenses. At night, in my empty studio, I spent a lot of time staring at the ceiling. I let waves of loneliness wash over me and break somewhere beyond my range of vision. It felt good. It felt better than being happy had ever felt, more real. I didn’t think about Jesse too much, although there were times I saw his face floating above me. Then I wondered what he was doing, and I would have called him, if I’d had a phone.

I thought what I was looking for would come with the kids I was taking care of but it didn’t—it came unexpectedly, in the grocery store. I was in the produce section, feeling the nectarines. They were all too mushy. I turned and almost bumped into a woman pushing a cart. I smiled apologetically and she

smiled back . Then I noticed the little girl sitting in the woman's cart. She was staring up at me with deep gray eyes and I walked backwards, slowly, so I could watch her, because the moment I saw her I knew she was my daughter. Maybe I can't prove it scientifically, but she had to be, because I could feel it just the way I knew I was dead when she was taken away from me. I knew because of the look in her eyes, like someone lost and found. I knew because I had that feeling again, like everything inside my body had been sucked out with a vacuum cleaner, but finally it was returned with a rush of air through empty passages and my heart thudding again, sending blood rushing and tingling into places I didn't even know I had. My heart was beating so fast I thought I would faint; my brain wasn't getting blood because it had all rushed to the surface of my skin. I watched her until she and her mother disappeared around the bananas, then I set down my shopping basket and ran from the store.

I went home to my apartment and packed my backpack. I knew it was time to go. The people I was afraid of kept appearing in strange hallucinations—Jesse shaking my mother's hand, my father pushing my daughter in a shopping cart. I left a note on my door for the caretaker, and one for all my day care kids. I felt bad for leaving such a mess behind. Not in the apartment, I mean, in their lives. I guess in Jesse's life also. I was just a messy person all over the place. On the bus to St. Paul I started feeling really guilty about that. I hadn't told anyone where I was going, as if my life were somehow disconnected from everyone else in the world's, and I had no obligation to them. When I got off the bus I started for Jesse's apartment slowly, shuffling along the edge of the sidewalk. I was suddenly afraid of what I'd find.

When I got to the front door I stood for a moment. Could it be my home anymore? I knocked, and when there was no answer I tried the doorknob. The door was unlocked and swung open. I stepped into the living room and looked around. Everything looked the same.

"Hello?" I called, "anybody home?" Then I heard the sound of the shower and, over that, the sound of footsteps coming from the bedroom. I turned to see Leah rushing towards me.

"Shana!" she shrieked, hugging me, "you're back!" Then she stepped away, ran her hands through her hair. "We-Jesse didn't think you were coming back."

I just stared at her. I couldn't say anything. What could I say? She was wearing pajamas.

"Jesse's in the shower," she told me. I nodded. "You can have him," she said in a rush. "I mean, you can have him back."

"Leah," I said, suddenly very tired, at the edge of tears, "he's not a thing to *have*." Although, maybe I'd had him, and now I didn't anymore. Did I think he'd pine away for me? Did I think the world stopped when I wasn't there? Still, two years obliterated in two monthes. Somehow it didn't hit me in the pit of the stomach as I'd expected. If I'd ever loved him it was with a dead love, all taking and no giving. He'd been the only good think about my life in St. Paul, but I had used him like a crutch to stay upright, and that's not something you do to someone you love.

"I know" she said, "I just meant."

"It's okay, I know what you meant," I said, "I don't blame you." Then Jesse came in, a towel around his waist, running his hand through his wet

hair. He stopped when he saw me, teetering back on his heels as if he was about to turn and run the other way. Then he took a deep breath.

“Shana,” he said. “I didn’t think you were coming back.” He looked at Leah.

“I know,” I said, “I heard.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. He did look pretty sorry, standing there in his towel, shifting from one skinny leg to the other. We all looked pretty sorry, actually. I might have laughed.

“I should go,” I said. I took my apartment keys off my key ring and gave them to Jesse. “I’ll come back some other time and get my clothes and stuff. I’ll let you know.”

I took Jesse’s hand and shook it, then I hugged Leah. I didn’t know what else to do. They both stared at me. I tried to say something, to give some kind of explanation for my behavior, but it seemed like anything that wasn’t clear didn’t need to be. I left them there, in the living room.

I walked back down to the bus stop. Where was there left to go? The number three bus would take me to the greyhound station, and there was nowhere left to go but home. I had a few things to say, finally, to my parents. I pictured them sitting at the kitchen table, the evening newspaper sectioned between them. My mother would be cleaning her glasses, trying to get all the smudges out so she could read better, and my father’s vein would be bulging over some editorial. I decided, as I waited for the bus, that I didn’t need to come back to Jesse’s apartment for the rest of my clothes or the lamp painted with butterflies or the chair I’d stenciled with red and orange leaves. If I hadn’t

needed all that stuff in the last few months, why would I need it for the rest of my life? What, really, could I not live without?

Charm, Beauty



My mother is a physicist and so logical she says it is pointless to talk about what happens to people after they die. "Matter can neither be created nor destroyed," she said when I asked where she thinks my father is now.

"So you think he's still around?" I asked

"No," she said, sighing heavily. "I don't know what I think. I don't want to talk about it anymore." It's been 15 years and my mother has since remarried and divorced but I don't think she's gotten over my father's death. My step-father was a physicist as well, but everybody knew he wasn't as smart as my mother. I never knew my real father. Well, I knew him, but he killed himself when I was three. My sister Trina would tell me stories about him to put me to sleep at night when mother was working late at the lab.

"He was a brilliant man," Trina said, sitting on the edge of my bed and smoothing my hair with her hand, "but a little bit manic. He was always up and down. He didn't have any common sense, didn't understand things like how light bulbs worked or how to do algebra. When Chad and I had a question about something like that, we'd always go ask Mom. But if we wanted to hear a story, or learn a song, he was the one we went to." She twirled my hair around her index finger. "He had wavy copper hair, just like yours. He was beautiful."

"Remember when we went to see him in *Othello*?" she asked. I nodded, although my only memories of my father are of my mother crying in the bathroom before the funeral I didn't go to. "I was so proud he was my father, he

had such a gift, you could really feel what he was feeling, you could read it in his face. He was like you, in that sense."

Trina started to sing "Goodnight Irene." Her voice wavered, but she persevered. When she got to "Sometimes I live in the city, sometimes I live in the town," I felt my eyes start to close.

"No!" I said, struggling awake. "I want to hear more about Dad."

"He always sang this song to put you to sleep," she said, smoothing my hair again, and I closed my eyes.

My mother always said I slept like the dead. The only time I woke by myself was in terror—I dreamt about lions every night the year I was ten, the year my mother remarried. That year I woke up early every morning, sweating, my face slick with tears, to sit by the window and watch the morning rise with pale light. Other years I woke only when my mother shook me, jolting me by both shoulders and shouting my name. I would break the surface of sleep with a start, a sharp intake of breath. "What?" I would scream.

"Time to wake up," my mother would say.

The spring I was twelve my mother went to a conference in Switzerland for two weeks. I know Switzerland is a beautiful place, because she sent me postcards, and because, ever since, when she sees lush green landscape or snowy mountains or piercing blue sky she'll sigh and say "just like Switzerland." I hate Switzerland. Trina was away at school, her last year at the

state university, and so my brother Chad and Robert, my step-father, and I were the only ones home. The first night I sang myself to sleep with "Good-night Irene," although I couldn't imagine who would be seeing me in their dreams. I woke up in the middle of the night, sweating, shivering. I couldn't remember what I'd dreamed but I knew it was something terrible. I got out of bed in a daze and shuffled down the hallway to my mother's room. She used to let me get in bed with her when I had nightmares. I knocked softly--no answer. I knocked again. I swung the door open just as I realized my mother was gone. Robert was sitting up in bed, reading a Scientific American. On the cover was a map of North America. The light from the bedside table lamp formed a pool in his lap. He looked up. "What?" he said. I turned and ran.

Robert and I battled over breakfast cereal. He hated the smell of oatmeal, and I have to admit I made it every morning just to see the nausea flood his face. Yes, maybe I wanted him to hate me. Maybe I thought if he hated me enough he'd leave, and then my mother would come home and never go away again, but it didn't work out that way. He was patient. He persevered, I'll say that for him. He didn't let on to my mom that things were going badly, the whole two weeks she was gone. I heard him on the phone, talking about his job search--he always talked so loudly I could hear him all over the house, but I wasn't sure if it was because he wanted me to hear what he was saying, or what he wasn't saying. One night he even tried to help me with my math homework. Chad was out with his drinking buddies that night, although he didn't drink. He was the designated driver. I'd been working for hours on the same

assignment, getting nowhere. The desk in my room was covered with scratch paper, but every answer I got was wrong. It was pointless. I knew I wouldn't be able to get through the next weeks by myself. Chad tried to help sometimes, but my mother was the only one who could explain things in a way I could understand.

"Let me see," Robert said, coming into my room and sitting down on my bed. He grabbed my notebook off my desk and began flipping through it. "First of all, you have to write more neatly." I snatched the notebook from him. I didn't see what my penmanship had to do with anything. He laughed when he looked at my book and saw what I was working on. "You're still doing square roots?" I tried to cover up the page so he couldn't see. "God," he said, "I think I was doing calculus when I was your age. And I thought I was the stupid one in this household." He stretched out on my bed and I could see his smooth stomach where his tee-shirt rode up. He had been a graduate student of my mother's when they met, and I figured she married him because he was smart like her, different from my father, but now I was starting to wonder. Anyone who could do calculus seemed smart to me, but Robert hadn't been able to find any work since he got his Ph.D. I asked my mother once why she had married Robert, and she told me she thought she'd found the exact opposite of my father. "I loved your father," she said, "but he couldn't concentrate, couldn't apply himself to anything that paid the rent. That was fine for a while, but with three kids you need to do more than unpaid community theater."

Robert got off my bed and stood behind my chair.

"Will you go away," I asked. "You're not helping."

"Calm down," he said.

"I don't want to entertain you," I said, trying to concentrate on my math book.

"Don't use that tone around me," he said. I looked up, surprised. I'd never heard Robert talk that way to me before. He'd hardly talked to me in the two years he'd been living with us.

"I can use any tone I want," I told him.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw his right hand move and I put my hands over my head but no blows came. I heard him snickering. "You're such a baby," he said.

That night I woke up in quiet warm darkness. It was too dark, too warm. I turned over to find Robert sitting on the bed next to me, inches away. I stared at him, and then I heard the scream, high and long and loud, and then he was clamping his heavy hand over my mouth.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"What are *you* doing?" I asked, when he took his hand away.

"You had a night mare," he said. "You were screaming in your sleep."

"Go away," I said.

"You look a bit like your mother when you're angry," he said, and got off my bed.

The next morning I asked Chad to put a lock on my bedroom door.

"Why?" he wanted to know. What was I trying to keep out? What was I doing in

there? I needed some privacy, I told him. You don't need privacy, he told me, you're only twelve.

"Robert came into my room last night," I told him.

"He probably just wanted to say good night," Chad said.

"It was the middle of the night!" I said.

"Come here, let me show you something," he said. I went. He took me outside, brushing his straw-blond hair out of his squinting eyes, looking up at the sun, turning around, tilting the little piece of cardboard and wood he held in his hand. "Look," he showed me the shadow of the wood falling on the cardboard, covering the lines marked 2, 4, 8, 16, resting somewhere before 32. "It's still early," he said, "the sun isn't very high in the sky, so it's like a natural S.P.F. of about 30." I nodded, uncomprehending. "Sun Protection Factor," he explained. "You wouldn't need to wear any sunscreen at this time of day. You see, the lower the angle of the sun," my eyes began to wander. Any talk of angles, and I was lost. "You don't understand," he said.

"Sorry Chad," I told him, "my mind doesn't work like yours." He gave me the little contraption.

"Hold on to it," he said. "Watch how it changes. You'll figure it out." He went back inside. I could see Chad would be no help. I closed my hand, splintering the wood. I ripped up the cardboard into tiny pieces and distributed them around the lawn, the brown grass, what used to be a garden in the back. The only thing still alive was the rhubarb Trina planted years ago.

That summer my mother was asked to come back to Switzerland, to work on a research project at the lab in Geneva. She described the accelerator to me, the miles and miles it, how they needed that much space to get the atoms to speed up fast enough to smash and break apart, to let them study the tiny particles that made up all matter. I pictured it like a huge track, the little atoms dressed in racing jerseys. "I just don't see why you need to go," I tried to reason with her. "Other people can race the atoms."

"It's an honor," she told me, "I've been asked to work with the greatest minds in high-energy physics." That she wanted to go was even worse. I could see the desire in her wet eyes. I bit my lip to keep from screaming, to keep from taking her arm and never letting her go. I turned away and looked at the pale blue walls of my bedroom, the Frank Benson calendar she'd bought me. The month of May had a woman in a billowing white dress, holding a sun umbrella, her son behind her, in a sailor suit and straw hat. Both of them looking at me frankly, coolly, the woman's eyes dark and calm, the boy's blue eyes round and staring. "Yes?" they asked. "Go on," they told me. I thought of my bedroom door with no lock, Chad in his room in the attic, Robert down the hall, the empty summer days.

"You can't leave," I told her, trying to formulate the words. I wished I had Trina's gift for argument, Chad's logic. "You can't go. I need you to help me with math." I'd failed algebra, so I'd have to make it up in summer school. I'd been getting D's in math throughout middle school, so my mother was getting resigned to it, but I'd never failed before. I knew she was worried about me, but

I also knew she thought I was hopeless. You got your father's genes, she told me once. He couldn't even do long division.

"You just need to spend more time on it," she told me. "I know you can get through it," she said. "Robert will be here to help you, and Chad."

"It's not the same," I told her. "I need you."

"I'll always be here for you," she said, "no matter what happens. You can call me in Geneva." I reached out my arms to her and she hugged me.

"Remember you have charm and beauty," she whispered in my ear. I could remember the names of quarks, the subatomic particles my mother taught her students about, because they were graceful words I could understand, not ugly impenetrable sounds like "lepton" or "muon." Numbers and formulas were beyond me but I could remember charm quark, strange quark, truth quark, and beauty quark. The other two were up and down quark--I wasn't so interested in them.

The last I saw of her she was wheeling her navy-blue suitcase down the jet way, holding it by the collapsible metal handle, looking as jaunty as the stewardesses.

That night, in my room, and every night afterwards all that long summer I hit my fist on my right thigh, rhythmically. It started as entertainment, a test to see how hard I could hit myself, but soon it became a need, an escape. As long as I was hitting myself I wasn't thinking about math, or how far away my mother was. The act was a talisman to keep Robert away, to remind me what pain felt like, so I wouldn't mistake that empty feeling of loneliness and hopelessness for true pain. I chanted the words "charm, beauty, strange, truth"

like a mantra as I pounded until that one spot on my leg was all I could feel, and all else was blackness.

I wore long shorts to summer school, never put on a bathing suit. That blue bruise was mine, and no one could share in its glory, until one night I hit further down, and the next morning on my way to school I noticed the bruise peeking out below my shorts. It was too late to go back and change—I'd been tardy three times already. One more time and I'd fail, again. I kept my hand over my leg all through class, casually, but when we had to work problems I was exposed. Mrs. Robbins asked to see me after class. I gathered my books up slowly, waiting for everyone else to leave. I walked up to her desk and stood in front of her, my book bag on my right shoulder. As I walked the bag banged into the bruise with each step.

"Can you take your bag off for a minute?" she asked. I was trapped. I hesitated for long enough to realize I had no choice, then let the bag slip off my shoulder. We both looked at the bruise, its black center radiating to blue and yellow around the edges. It was the worst yet. "Can you tell me what happened?" she asked. I couldn't think of anything but the truth and that was mine, so I said nothing. "Did you fall?" she asked "did you fall off your bike or something?" I shook my head.

The nurse asked me more pointed questions. She got to see the whole leg when she made me take my shorts off. From my knee up were bruises in various forms and colors. "Who did this to you?" she demanded. "You need to tell me so we can help you. Who did this to you?"

She called my step-father and he came to get me. "I don't even know how she can walk, with her leg like that," she told him. "Do you know what's wrong with her?" He shook his head, silent also. She took my arm one last time as Robert walked out of her office. "Who did it to you?" she asked again. I cut my eyes to Robert's retreating form, then back to her. She ran after him, down the hallway. "Mr. Osborn," she called. Then she had him by the arm, speaking quietly. "Mr. Osborn, maybe you could stay and talk to me a minute." He removed her hand from his arm.

"We're going," he said to me. Outside, he got in his car. I got in also. He took me by the wrist, looked into my eyes. "Don't you ever do that again," he told me, empty words. I hadn't done anything. He rested his hands on the steering wheel, stared straight ahead. "Get out," he said, "you can walk." His voice was thin and full of pain, but I wasn't afraid of him. He couldn't hurt me more than I had hurt myself already. I got out of the car.

When my mother came home at the end of the summer we had a open-house. It was my mother's welcome home party she threw for herself, her celebration of her life and her children's. Chad had taken the SAT's early and had gotten a perfect score, 1600. He explained to me it was just a game, you had to guess and if you guessed right, you won a National Merit scholarship to the college of your choice. Trina had decided to go to law school after interning with a judge in Washington DC for the summer. I didn't tell my mother that I had failed summer school. She'd find out, soon enough. Robert had opened my report card after I refused to look at it.

We had never had a big party before, just little birthday parties when we were younger. My mother decided to go all out. She invited everyone she knew. Old friends, new friends, colleagues, neighbors—everyone we knew received an invitation that Trina, home for the week, had written up in her self-taught calligraphy. She slaved over them for days, while my mother baked and bought and phoned caterers. Chad cut the lawn and trimmed the bushes while I vacuumed the carpets. Robert was in his study. He said he had work to do, but I think he was angry that my mother hadn't paid much attention to him since she'd been back. She seemed more interested in party plans than talking to him about the work she'd done in Switzerland.

The party was from four to eight p.m., but by twenty after four no one had arrived. My mother was still scuttling around, arranging and re-arranging dishes and vases of flowers. She wouldn't let me help. I sat and watched her. As guests started to arrive I moved from room to room, looking for the least populated area. At every turn was someone who knew me, who squealed and told me they hadn't seen me since I was *this tall*. How was I? How was school? Wasn't I proud of my brother, wasn't my sister smart, did I take after my mother, did I like physics too? I took to following my mother around, so people would speak to her instead of me. By seven p.m. many guests had come and gone, but more people were still arriving. My mother and I entered the living room. My step-father was leaning against the door frame, a glass of champagne in his hand, a glass that hadn't left his hand all afternoon. As my mother walked through the door she smiled at him, passed on, and he leaned over to her and whispered something, his lips brushing her ear. She blushed. He held his glass up as if in a toast, looking at me, then back at her.

"You've got two brilliant children," he told her.

"That's so sweet of you," she said, smiling at me. "They are wonderful children." She walked on. Hadn't she heard? Had she forgotten she had three children? Did she not consider Trina a child anymore? I looked at Robert.

"Two out of three isn't bad," he said, winking at me. I stepped close to him, reached my hand up to his face. He flinched, then relaxed as I took his face in my hands, thumb on one side, fingers on the other. I had to stretch my hand wide as it would go.

I spoke softly, the pitch of my voice lower than it had ever been before. "You don't know it yet," I told him, "but I'm going to be brilliant too." He swatted my hand away, and champagne dribbled down the front of his pressed shirt. He tried to laugh, wiping at the spill, but when he looked around and realized no one was paying any attention to us, he took my left wrist between his thumb and forefinger and squeezed, looking me straight in the eye, though I could tell his drunken eyes weren't focusing.

"You're like your father," he told me. "You'll always be a disappointment to your mother." As he concentrated on my left hand, I pulled my right hand back as far as it would go and then brought my fist up to his face again, smashing the thin champagne glass into his teeth, and this time it was blood that ran down his shirt. And you may want to know, as the therapist they took me to asked, how I felt about what I'd done, and I will tell you this: I'm not proud of what I did, but I even though Robert has two fewer teeth, I don't regret it. I'm not saying what I did was right, I'm just saying I did it, and I would do it again, if I had to.

The day my mother told me she was marrying Robert it was fall, the beginning of sixth grade. She was trying to help me with fractions. I couldn't understand why one fraction divided by another fraction made a bigger number. It seems that division is about breaking things apart, making them smaller. I was close to tears and when she looked at me tears came into her own eyes and she put her head down on the kitchen table. I wanted to put my arm around her; I knew she felt as alone as I did.

"I can't do it all," she said, to herself, not to me. And I shut my eyes tight, and tried to believe that this man I had met only a few times before would be the answer.

To See the Face of God



My mother is going deaf, and instead of accepting she can't hear everything, she invents elaborate, often rude, alternatives to what has actually been said. Although I'm almost 21 and should be able to take care of myself, she often comes into my room in the morning to check up on me.

"Don't you have to work today?" she asks.

I turn over on my stomach. "Not until noon," I say into my pillow.,

"Don't call me that," she says, coming closer to the bed. I sit up and stare at her.

"Mom," I say, "I didn't call you anything. I said I don't have to work until noon."

"Oh," she says. "I thought you said something else."

"Obviously," I say as she exits and shuts my door with a bang. I get out of bed and I open my shade to look at the sun. I wonder what she thought I said. "Don't be a goon"? I read somewhere that if you stare at the sun at just the right time during the day, you'll see the face of God. I've never been much for religion but I'd like to see what God looks like, just so I'd know him if I ran into him downtown. He might look like my father, or my old gerbil, or my sister Daria. I'm not seeing anything yet but white-yellow heat that makes my head ache, so I get up and close the shade.

I peer into my closet for a while, looking for something to wear, but all my clothes are ugly. I work at Dayton's, in the lingerie department, and we have to dress a certain way, as if we bought all our clothing at Dayton's.

Unfortunately, with the salary I'm making I can't afford to buy my clothing at anywhere but discount stores. I go across the hallway to my sister's room.

She's not there, already downtown hanging out with her friends, I suppose, like she does every Saturday. She has a lot of clothes, and she never minds if I raid her closet. Life is a performance to her, and she's always telling me the most important thing is the right costume.

My sister Daria is eighteen, two years younger than I am. She's a nice kid, but she's turning into Madonna. She started about a year ago, and unfortunately she's stuck in the early '80's stage so all her clothing is short skirts and silvery headbands, nothing very appropriate for Dayton's. I find an old black dress in the back of her closet, from the old days, before she was a rock star. She and her band haven't gotten any gigs yet, but they're sure they will soon. In the meantime they practice in our basement after school until my mother begs them to stop. They play a kind of grunge pop, with a heavy beat and a lot of distortion, but sweet Madonna lyrics float over the top. Daria and I decided that as soon as she and her band make it, I'll quit working at Dayton's and be their manager and costume designer.

I take the A bus downtown to Dayton's. The warmth of the bus lulls me into a daydream about Daria's band. I can see Daria on stage, wearing a glittery purple dress and cape I designed for her, while thousands of teenage girls, dressed in copies of her outfit, scream the lyrics back at her. I wake with a start as the bus jolts over a pothole, eight blocks after my stop. I pull the bell desperately and step off the bus into a puddle, muddying Daria's lavender shoes. Tina will mad that I am late and messy. I run all the way to the store, but stop just outside the doors to catch my breath. I breathe slowly, in, out,

then march through the doors. I go up to lingerie, on the second floor. Tina is waiting for me by the sports bras, examining her French-manicured nails. She must have spent a weeks salary on them, because those perfect half-moons of white that are impossible to get outside of a beauty salon.

"You were supposed to be here seven minutes ago," Tina says when she sees me.

"Sorry," I say. "The bus was late."

"Well, I don't really care to hear your excuses," she says, getting her black shoulder bag from behind the counter. "I'm late now."

"Sorry," I say again, stupidly. Once Tina is gone I am alone in the lingerie section. Sometimes there are two people working, but not today. February is the slowest month. The nearest clerk is way over in housewares. It can get lonely sometimes, but I don't mind. I hope that if I work in the lingerie section long enough, they will promote me to clothing. Then I can learn more about clothing design. For now, I'm learning all there is to learn about bra design. I go over to check the underwires. They are all out of order, 34 B's mixed up with 38 C's. I am kneeling down on the floor to put the D's on the bottom rack when I sense someone behind me. I stand and turn around. It is a nice-looking youngish man, wearing jeans and a wool sweater. He tugs on a lock of hair and stares at my shoes. I wish he wouldn't, because my shoes are splotted with mud. I try to redirect his attention.

"Can I help you find something?" I ask.

"Yes," he says, "I mean, no. I just want to look at those." He points to the rack I'm standing in front of.

"Oh, the underwires?" I say, moving out of the way.

"Yes, those." He eyes them warily.

"Are you looking for anything in particular?" I ask. "Any color you like?"

"Oh, it's not for me," he says.

"A present?" I ask. Suddenly I realize he looks familiar. I watch him shift from foot to foot and know I have seen him do this somewhere else, in some completely different situation.

"For my wife." He says with such tenderness I have an urge to close my eyes and imagine it is me he is talking about. "It's her birthday. I don't know what to get her."

"What does she look like? So I know what colors she would look good in. And what size does she wear?" I flip through the 34 B's, wondering if a nice-looking man will ever buy me a bra.

"She has long dark brown hair, and very fair skin. She has dark brown eyes that match her hair perfectly." I feel myself blushing, because he could be describing me. I close my eyes again, and imagine he is talking about me. He clears his throat. I open my eyes, and realize this man was my geography teacher in middle school. How could I have forgotten? He had been very young then, his first year teaching, and he would shift from foot to foot when ever anyone asked him a question.

"I think she'd look good in green," I say. Green is the best color on me, so it should look good on his wife. "Forest green. What size does she wear, Mr. Brandt?" He looks at me with horror. "I had you for geography in 8th grade," I tell him. "I'm Kat. Kat Gilbert. You probably don't remember me." He looks somewhat relieved.

“No, I remember now,” he says. “You had very creative map-making skills.” His eyes crinkle. He is smiling at me. I smile back, a slow, true smile that I haven’t felt in a long time. The only part of school I liked in 8th grade was geography. I could draw maps freehand, maps of every country on the globe. I think if I could stay in this moment forever I could be happy.

“So, what size?” I ask him again. The horror returns to his face. “Oh,” I say, “you don’t know her size?” He shakes his head. “How tall is she? Do you know what size dress she wears?”

He pauses, then looks away. “She’s about your size.”

“34 B,” I say, turning to the rack. “That’s a good guess, anyway. 34 B is the most common size, like size 7 in shoes, did you know that?” He shakes his head. I hold up a green silk bra. He nods. “It’s beautiful.” You’re beautiful, he is saying to me.

“You can always return it if it doesn’t fit,” I tell him, walking to the cash register.

“I really appreciate your help,” he says, taking a credit card out of his wallet and setting it down on the counter. As I reach to take the credit card he reaches also, and our hands collide. I pull my hand away and watch him put the card back in his wallet and take out a check. “Sorry,” he says, “I think I’m over my credit limit. I’d better write a check instead.” As he writes I wonder what he is trying to tell me, and when he hands me the check I understand. The check has his address on it. He wants me to know. I run the check through the register and as I hand him his receipt I feel the warmth of his fingers, the callous on his thumb.

"Thank you," I say.

"Thank *you*," he says, and I shiver.

After work I get back on the bus, clutching Mr. Brandt's address in one hand, my bus pass in the other. I stare at his address until my eyes burn. 910 Orchard. His street is near the bus line, so I just need to ride the bus a few miles farther than usual. By the time I get off it is almost dark, and I walk a few blocks down Orchard and find 910. It is a small stone house set back from the street a little more than the others, with a long winding path leading to the front door. I start up it before I can ask myself what I am doing. I am almost at the front door before I panic. I don't know what I want with Mr. Brandt. I freeze before the front stoop, feeling my heart pounding painfully in my chest. I stand there, both hands pressed to my heart, trying to slow it down.

A light goes on in the bay window to the left of the front door and I duck between the hedge and the house, below the window. I stay crouched until my heart stops pounding, then slowly raise my head until I can see over the window sill. Mr. Brandt is sitting in an armchair, with a little girl on his lap. He is holding a big book in front of them, with a picture of a rabbit on the front. I think I recognize the book from when I was little. It's about a rabbit with a loose tooth.

I watch as he turns the page, pointing. I can't see the girl's face. A woman walks into the room, Mr. Brandt's wife, I suppose. She looks just the way he described her. She is not beautiful but she looks peaceful, happy. I wonder if she is wearing the bra he bought her, if he has given it to her. I stare hard at her chest and I think I can see straight through her denim shirt to the green silk. She says something to Mr. Brandt and he holds up the book. She

sighs and sits down on the arm of his chair, rests her head on his shoulder. He keeps reading. I watch his lips move and try to make out the words. I think I see him say “rabbit,” “mother,” “the end.”

He closes the book and the girl climbs off his lap. She has light brown hair held back with two gold barrettes. Her mother takes her hand and they disappear through the doorway. Mr. Brandt stands, still holding on to the book, and turns off the light next to the chair. The room goes dark. The instant the light goes off I realize my hands are numb, my legs are cold and cramped. I stand up and hobble back to the sidewalk, brushing dirt and bits of leaves from my coat.

The next day after work I go back to my post, and the next. If I arrive before six they are usually in the dining room, and I get to watch them eat dinner. The dining room is also in the front of the house, so I have a good view from the window to the right of the front door. There is a hedge there too, with just enough room for me to crouch, hidden from anyone passing by. Around six-thirty they disappear, to the kitchen I suppose. I can't follow—no hedges around the side or back of the house. The Brandts emerge after a few minutes and go into the living room and I discreetly change posts.

They spend the early evening in the living room. Sometimes Mr. Brandt reads to his daughter, whom I've named Sarah. Other times she colors or does homework at the little wooden table at the edge of the room. Mrs. Brandt, knits sometimes; it looks as if she is making a purple sweater. I wonder if I could learn to knit. Probably not. Mr. Brandt corrects papers, or plans lessons. I recognize the geography book, the same one he used when I took geography with him.

At eight-thirty every night Mrs. Brandt stands up and takes Sarah by the hand. This is my favorite part, because sometimes she screams and gets red in the face and Mrs. Brandt has to pick her up and carry her off. I'm glad they're not entirely perfect. Mr. Brandt stays a few more minutes, then he stands too, and turns off the lights. I try to time it perfectly, so I duck just as the lights go off. Without the light reflecting in the window, he could see me, probably. I wonder what he would do, but I never stay to find out. I've tried to walk around the house to see where they've gone, but although I can see lights on upstairs, I can't see in any of the windows. I walk home slowly. My parents are watching t.v. when I get home, and Daria is usually upstairs doing her homework or writing songs. She tries to get me to help her, and I have to remind her that I was terrible at school and have no musical ability. No one seems to notice my absences, although one night when I get home there is a note on my bed in Daria's scrawling script. "Where have you been?" the note says. The next night my parents are waiting for me in the living room. I pretend not to notice them and start up the stairs, but my father's voice stops me.

"Kat," he says; a command, not a question. I wait, one foot on the floor, one on the first step. "Kat," he says again. I turn and walk into the living room. My mother and father are sitting on the love-seat, facing me. My mother is looking down at her skirt, smoothing the pleats. My father looks half-grave, half-amused. "Your mother," he begins. I shut my eyes, and picture Mr. Brandt's living room. He stops. I open my eyes. "Your mother wants to know why you've missed dinner every night this week." I avoid my father's eyes; I look at the top of my mother's head.

"I've been busy." I say.

"I'm crazy?" my mother says. "No, you're crazy."

"I've been *busy!*" I tell her.

My father glances at my mother, clears his throat. "Your mother would like you to be home for dinner." I nod.

"It's the least you can do," my mother says, tears filling her eyes, "after all-" she cannot finish the sentence, which is why, I suppose, she makes my father speak for her.

"After all we've done for you," my father finishes. I nod again, trying not to be ungrateful, trying not to think "what *have* you done for me?"

"Are we finished?" I ask. I didn't mean it to come out that way I'm too old to be a tortured adolescent.

"Once we've decided this," my father says.

"I'll be here for dinner," I tell them.

"You're dismissed," my father says. I go back to the front hall and up the stairs. Daria is sitting at the top of the stairs. I try to slip past her to go up to my room, but she grabs me by the leg.

"Are you okay?" she asks me, holding on to my leg firmly but gently.

"You haven't seen us practice lately. We've got a new song called "Highlight Me."

The next day after work I take the bus straight home. Daria and her band are practicing in the basement. I go down to watch for a couple minutes. Kris, the bass player, waves to me and Sydney, on the synthesizer, comes over and gives me a hug. Daria is fiddling with the amps. "Where's Rachel?" I ask. Daria turns to me.

"We don't know what's up with Rachel," she says. "We've had some differences. We might have to find a new drummer." I wonder if I could play drums.

I go upstairs to help my mother with dinner. She raises her eyebrows, trying not to be surprised to see me, but says nothing. She hands me a head of lettuce she's just washed. She chops the chicken, while I rip up the lettuce, remembering we were at Mr. Brandt's house, even on the outside, instead of here. "You don't need to pulverize it," she says. I hadn't noticed, but I'd been shredding the lettuce into tiny shreds. I go to the fridge and get out a tomato.

After dinner my father grills me about my job.

"Do you think you'll get a raise soon?" he asks.

"No," I say.

"You're barely making a living wage. Have you thought any more about going to college? It will make you more employable," he says.

"I'm employed," I mumble through a mouthful of food.

"You need to think about what you want out of life, where you're going," he says. I know what I want. I want to live in that little stone house set back from the street. I want to talk to Mr. Brandt about geography and help him with her homework. I want to live somewhere where everyone doesn't think I'm stupid.

I help my mother wash the dishes, then retreat to my room when I can't be satisfied with my behavior. The clock on my wall says 8:13, but it's running fast, so I think maybe if I run over to the Brandt's I can catch a glimpse of them. I go to the head of the stairs and listen until I can hear the sound of the television. That means my parents are in the den, so I sneak

downstairs. Once I get outside I sprint all the way to the Brandt's. The light in the living room flicks off just as I round the corner and I slow to a walk, breathing heavily. I make a slow circuit around the house, bolder now, not worrying so much about hedges, but I still can't see anything upstairs. The angle is wrong. Then I think about the pine tree in the back yard and go back there and climb until the branches above are too small to hold my weight.

All the windows in the back are dark, but I figure if I wait long enough, someone will come into one of these rooms. After minutes, hours, the light turns on, and I catch a glimpse of Mr. Brandt before he pulls the curtains closed. Tears fill my eyes, that they put curtains on their upstairs windows. Of course they would, to shield themselves from people like me. I can still see vague silhouettes, and I watch the two forms walk around the bedroom, then get into bed. I picture her in a long floral nightgown, him in a T-shirt and boxer shorts. When they turn off the light I close my eyes, holding tightly to the tree trunk sticky with sap. I can see them in my mind as clearly as if they were in front of me. With eyes closed, I keep watch. I am protecting them from the darkness, keeping them alive. I am like a bird. I will stay in the tree all night.

I wake to the sound of pine needles crunching. The sky is just starting to get light, and I see a face below me. It is Madonna with her gleaming blond hair and glittery purple dress. "Madonna!" I call down to her, but she isn't listening. She has her eyes closed and her face turned up to me. She is singing a song from *Evita*. Her voice is soft but full of power.

"Where are you going to?" she sings, "Where are you going to?"

"Madonna!" I say, climbing down to the ground to meet her. "How did you find me?"

She shows me the slip of paper with 910 Orchard on it. "I'm not Madonna," she says. I try to look at her face to make sure, but it's too dark. She reaches out her arms toward me, and I fall into them. It is my little sister and she is holding me now, calling me back from a far-off place.

Secrets of Myself



When I was fifteen I overheard my grandmother tell my parents in German, the language she used to tell secrets, that although I was gold when I was young now I was. . . I strained to hear, but couldn't translate the last word. (I had picked up enough German to know when I was being talked about--I was die mittlere, the middle one--but I didn't understand exactly what was being said). I could tell from her tone she meant I was something darker and less durable now, not as precious as I had been. My parents told me the same thing. They said I was sunshine when I was little, all smiles and blonde curly hair, big blue eyes. Don't all children go through this, the descent from lightness to darkness of adolescence? My parents seemed to think there was something more drastic about the change they saw in me. My appearance changed, certainly. After my mother first cut my hair, it grew in straight and dark. You can see this change in home videos. In the early ones I am a fat blonde toddler. Later, the videos focus on my little sister, and I flit across the screen, hiding from the camera. "Who's that?" my mother asks as an ugly girl in dark glasses clumps around the lawn on roller skates. "Must be a neighbor."

"That's me," I tell her. It was. It is.

II

I used to be afraid of everything. In kindergarten I was afraid of my art teacher, Mr. Kimmerlein. He was a tall man with dark eyes and black hair, whom everyone called Mr. K. We had art class Friday mornings. The first day

we were all given sheets of light brown paper, and Mr. K. demonstrated how to draw a forest in winter. With a few strokes of a brown pencil he drew a bare tree, then showed us how, if we outlined one side with black pencil and the other side with white, it would magically transform to a tree in shadow. The magic didn't work for me, and Mr. K's tall frame leaning over my shoulder, his loud voice booming in my ear, didn't help. I spent the first Friday staring at a blank sheet of paper. The next Friday when I woke up, the thought of walking down in the basement to the green-walled art class made me sick. I told my mother I had a stomach-ache and spent the day in bed. The next week I did the same thing,. I must have looked sick, because my mother didn't question me and let me stay home. I learned early how to run away from what I feared, although after the third or fourth or fifth Friday my mother finally made the connection and asked me what was so special about Fridays. "Art," I told her, my voice tight from trying not to cry, and she nodded and hugged me. "Not everyone is good at art," she told me. After that I went to school every Friday.

III

I was afraid people wouldn't like me once they got to know me. In high school I had two friends, Grace and Lily. We had all our classes together, and we ate lunch huddled in a corner of the cafeteria. During those four years I knew we were invisible outsiders, seeing but unseen. We were held together by the indifference, if not hatred, of everyone around us. Recently I saw an acquaintance from high school. We talked about what we had been like in high school, how we hoped we were different now.

"You guys were such snobs," she told me. "You only talked to each other, you never wanted to be friends with anyone else. I thought you guys were so smart, and you thought the rest of us were stupid."

Suddenly the image of the three of us sitting together, observing the rest of the classroom, whispering, shifts and I see us how our classmates must have seen us. We were so afraid we were outsiders that we made it come true.

IV

I learned from my parents how to be afraid. My father was afraid of dirt, mold, and bacteria. If a cookie fell on the floor he would sing out "throw it away! Get another one, throw that one away." If a hunk of cheese was moldy, my mother would calmly slice off the mold, or most of it, and eat the rest of the cheese. "It's good for you," she'd say. "like blue cheese." If my father had unwrapped the same cheese from its plastic bag he would have yelled "mold!" and pitched it into the garbage can. My father's fears bordered on the obsessive. He wouldn't let us pet neighborhood cats because they might have diseases, and if we did touch them he advised us to wash our hands immediately.

He saw fear and mistrust as adaptive. "You're alive because your grandfather was a worrier," he told me more than once. My grandparents left Czechoslovakia in 1939 because my grandfather was afraid of Hitler. My grandmother didn't want to leave her country, her parents and siblings who insisted it was foolish to leave, Hitler wasn't a threat. They are dead now, those ill-fated optimists, and my grandmother is alive.

My mother was afraid of raised voices and frowns. When my father was outraged about something that happened to me in school he'd get somebody on the phone and harangue them so loudly I could hear him from anywhere in the house. "The Merchant of Venice is anti-Semitic," he'd be lecturing my ninth-grade English teacher. "Why do you have them read Shakespeare's only anti-Semitic play?" If my mother had something unpleasant to say to me or my sisters, she would send my dad as the messenger. "Your mother," he would begin, and tears would come to my eyes. If he was speaking for her I must have done something terrible. "Your mother would like you to unload the dishwasher without being asked." My mother wanted me to do a lot of things unasked, like cleaning my room, mowing the lawn, getting good grades, never raising my voice in her presence. I know I'm not perfect, I told her more than once, but if not unloading the dishwasher is the worst thing I've ever done, you're a very lucky parent. I didn't tell her about my friend Katia, who dropped out of school to spend her days and nights drunk or high on State Street, or Lee, who tampered with a check her parents had given her and made off to Chicago with \$3,000, or all the students at my high school who smoked pot at the Van Hise street entrance or cigarettes on the Ash street steps or took other, more mysterious drugs on Regent Street. They were the bad ones, I thought then, not me.

V

My father always said I was too sensitive, too thin-skinned. I let everything hurt me. I had nightmares about Injun' Joe after seeing a puppet show of Huck Finn, so my parents didn't let me watch main-stream movies

until I was twelve. Later, when it became fashionable to admire “sensitive” men, the concept of anyone being too sensitive seemed strange.

My older sister lives in a trailer park in Tucson, Arizona. She has multiple chemical sensitivities and old trailers, according to her doctrine, are the best places to live because they emit fewer toxins than new trailers, or houses. She won't use the telephone, the stove, or any electric appliances because their electromagnetic-magnetic forces make her sick. She is sick all the time, has been for years. She can't read books, or write, because of chemicals in the ink. I'm not sure what she does all day. Last summer she left her trailer, borrowed her neighbor's Coleman stove, and drove up nearby Mt. Lemon. She spent the summer in her tent and sleeping bag. She doesn't work, but my parents still send her money every month. She also gets disability payments, although no doctor has been able to determine what her disability is. Sometimes I think she's living the good life, although I'm ashamed to admit that I would also like to escape, to give up, to stop trying to live the way I'm supposed to.

In elementary school when I woke in the night, screaming from a nightmare of lions or spiders or dead bodies, I would go to my parents room and shake my mother's shoulder gently. “You want to get in bed with us?” my mother would ask, and I would crawl in between them to lie quietly, straight and still so as not to take up space or kick either of them. My fathers light snores and my mother's whispery breathing would lull me to sleep.

My sister says my mother was a terrible mother, and that's why she (my sister) is so screwed up now. She complains of her deprived childhood, how my parents wouldn't let her go downhill skiing or take gymnastics because she

might get hurt. I thought she was crazy then--who would want to go downhill skiing? You might break your leg. My parents were good parents, you see, they taught me well. Of course, the question remains why I embraced my father's fear of mold and not his ability to be assertive.

VI

My first week of college a boy I liked told me I was too short to be a feminist. "What do you mean, too short?" I asked.

"It's just that I think of feminists as bigger," he said. I guess he meant I was too innocent-looking, fragile, to be one of those ball-breaking man-haters. I told him that anyone who thinks men and women are moral, social, and intellectual equals is a feminist. We didn't talk much after that.

My boyfriend now told me that I can't call myself a feminist unless I'm an activist. I don't shave my legs, I told him. I'm taking a stand. I don't like the idea of someone else telling me how my body should look, someone saying it is unattractive the way it naturally is. On the other hand, I don't let the hair on my head grow long and wild. I cut it, comb it, sculpt it into a certain, not particularly natural, shape. How do I decide how I want to look, how I want my body to look? My standards are certainly shaped by what I see around me, although it is filtered through my own aesthetic. I refused to wear acid-washed jeans in middle school, but I gave in to other fashion oddities, like cut-off jeans frayed to just the right point on my thigh. So why not shave my legs? It is partly laziness. Why bother? In the winter I don't have to look at my legs, except when I go to aerobics, so I let the hair grow. In the summer, however, I start to look at the J. Crew catalogue and compare my legs to the paper-smooth ones in the

pictures, and I become overwhelmed by a need to shave my legs. Then I do 300 hundred stomach crunches and compare myself to the models in bikinis. Yuck. Once I've shaved, I do feel sleeker and more attractive. Is this fair? Does it make sense? Men are more manly with a five-o'clock shadow, but a woman with bristly legs, some would argue, is barely a woman at all.

VII

My father, a physicist, tried to raise me and my sisters like boys, so that we would grow up to be scientists like him rather than schoolteachers like his mother. He refused to buy us dolls. He brought home Lincoln Logs, Legos. He showed us how to build elaborate structures with the Lincoln Logs. We made simple square houses with the Legos, and spent the rest of the afternoon playing house with the little Lego people. At the airport I would people-watch while my father lectured me on the difference between a DC-9 and a DC-10. They all looked like the same shiny metal monsters to me. He was disappointed that I hated math, couldn't understand the simplest physics concept, didn't want to make model airplanes. Where did he go wrong, he wondered. It's not your fault, I told him. You did your best, and I appreciate it. Now go away, I want to sew a new dress for my Barbie. Look, she can do stomach crunches!

VIII

My friend Clair hates herself. At least, that's what I've concluded after years of watching her starve herself, attempt suicide, sleep with men and women whose last names she doesn't know, and pop illegal drugs as if they were vitamin pills. She spent most of high school battling herself. At lunch she

sat, sullen, while Isa and I ate our sandwiches as quietly as possible. We offered her the crackers, the apples, the oranges, but she refused all of it, day after day, until we finally stopped asking. In Spanish class, she made lists of women in our school who were thinner than her, and each time the list was shorter. By senior year she had almost won the war. She had that hollow-eyed, hopeless expression I'd seen in pictures of holocaust victims, and her body was covered with a fine down. She was taking so many diet pills--Isa found the empty bottles in the locker they shared--that her hands trembled and she couldn't stop tapping her foot. She had been seeing a therapist but was finally hospitalized in March of that year.

Now, five years later, she is supposedly better. I had dinner with her at her apartment last year. She ate three peaches, said she was full. She wasn't as thin as she'd been but had that vacant look as she gazed at the glistening cheese on the pizza we'd ordered. I ate five pieces and regretted it, noticing her flat stomach, but I tried not to hate myself. She's still sick, I told myself, don't envy her. I haven't turned out like Clair; I don't abuse my body, not much, anyway. But I look in the mirror and I look in the Victoria's Secret catalogue and I know why she does it and I'm afraid, for all of us, for Clair on her exercise bicycle and my older sister in her trailer and my parents in their impenetrable brick house.

IX

A couple weeks ago I went hiking for the first time this year. Steve had heard about a great trail. He'd never been on it, but he said it wasn't hard. The plan was to go up one side of the mountain and down on an easier path we

both knew well. We started up and I noted the muddy spots, the bits of snow, but all I was concerned about was my new white shoes. My parents would have turned around at the first sight of snow. As we went up the trail got icier and steeper, but by the time I realized how frightening the climb would be, I was more frightened about going back down than continuing up. In the rough spots I crawled, digging in the snow with numb hands to keep from slipping off the narrow ledge. I looked back at the way we'd come and wondered how I had gotten that far, how I could possibly go the rest of the way. I wanted to sit on the trail and wait for rescue, but I knew no rescue was necessary and I didn't really want help from anyone but myself. When my right foot slipped and found only air I said to myself: this is it, no one will save you. How much do you want to live? I dug my left foot in the packed snow and, shifting my weight forward, heaved myself up to the path. Don't think, I counseled myself. If you show any fear, it will overtake you. I took a deep breath and kept my head down, putting one foot in front of the other.

The Hat



For years, ever since the end of elementary school when my mother finally lost control over my wardrobe, I refused to wear anything on my head, even in the coldest of Wisconsin winters. I hated those thin knit hats that made me look like a criminal, those thick hats with pompoms that made me look like a conehead. I admit I was more afraid of looking ridiculous than I was of getting cold.

It wasn't until I went to college in Minnesota that my desire for warmth overcame my fear of looking like an idiot. I went home for winter break my first year and found, rummaging through my mother's winter paraphernalia, a chenille hat. It was a rich rust color, deeper and more vibrant than any fabric I'd seen before. Thick and warm, it sat on my head at a jaunty angle, as if it belonged. It didn't mat my hair like other hats, or make my bangs stick out. It was a good color on me, my mother said, it made my eyes sparkle. Don't lose it, she said.

When I took it off, I thought hard about where to put it. I would place it my backpack, deep in my coat pocket, on the hook on my door. I never just left it on the floor somewhere, never carelessly tossed it on a table. I guarded that hat more jealously than anything in my life. Nothing else was irreplaceable. I wondered what I would do if I lost it--how could I go on? I would have to move to a warmer climate, a state where winter hats weren't necessary. I knew I would never find another hat like it. I imagined what I would do if I did lose it. Cry, first, I figured. Then I would put up signs: "lost, one rust-colored winter

hat. Great sentimental value. Reward." I would pay good money to get that hat back. With the hat on, I admired myself in the mirror. What a hat. I walked to campus, my head held high, seeing other people in their silly hats with pompons on top, or the blue-lipped, foolish hatless people with their collars turned up, and thought I have a hat, a beautiful hat.

Then I started to worry about my attachment to the hat. I started hearing voices telling me it wasn't wise to put too much faith in worldly things, for in the end they are only dust and ashes. I heard the poet, Elizabeth Bishop, say "the art of losing isn't hard to master." And of course, I'd mastered it already. I was famous for losing things. I lost my high school diploma. I lost the key to my jewelry box. I lost my diary. I lost all my data for my psychology honors project. I lost my heart, my mind, my soul, over and over again.

Oh, I tried to be organized. I had file folders, labeled, stored in their file box, but I never put important papers in them. The unimportant, the useless, that I had a good hold on. Sometimes, like when I lost my only copy of the syllabus for the class I was teaching, I wondered if I was trying to sabotage my own life.

When people complimented me on the hat I couldn't just say "thank-you." I had to mention how much I loved it, how afraid I was I might lose it, how I was afraid I loved it too much and would lose it for that reason, but if not, how I lost everything that mattered so I would probably lose it for that reason also. It was as if speaking of it would ward off the evil from happening.

In stores I tortured myself by looking at other hats and realizing none of them compared to my hat, none could fill the gap the loss of my hat would leave.

Finally, of course, I lost the hat. The weather was mild for a few days in the end of December, and although I had a dim feeling that I had misplaced the hat, I figured I had just put it down somewhere in my apartment and it would turn up soon. After a few days I began to rummage around my apartment, but the hat was nowhere it be found

The morning was cold, with a wind-chill well below zero, and I made one last pass through my apartment, looking behind the bookshelf, under the bed, in my dirty laundry. Strangely, I hadn't started to panic. I sat down and started to counsel myself. Stay calm, I said. Where did you last see it? I couldn't remember, it had been too long. I had been any number of places since I'd last seen the hat. Slowly, the words formed in my mind. I lost the hat. I lost my hat. Instead of the sticky weight of despair I expected, I felt the curious lightness of relief. The hat was gone and I was still alive. I wrapped my scarf around my head, pulled my hood over it, and made my way to school. I had to hold the hood on with both hands, fighting my way into the wind, but this was a small price to pay for my freedom. I was glad I lost the hat. Now I didn't have to worry about it anymore--I could live my life without wondering every second where that beautiful, beautiful hat was. I didn't have any urge to put up signs, to offer rewards. I didn't even ask anyone if they had seen my hat. I didn't rush out to search for a new hat. I accepted the loss much more calmly and rationally than I ever would have expected of myself.

This bliss was also too good to be true. A few days later I felt a lump in the inner pocket of the backpack, a pocket I never use. I reached in and pulled out the hat. Somehow it had slipped out of the main compartment of the backpack and I hadn't thought to look in the inner pocket. I didn't know what

to feel. Seeing the hat was like meeting some long-lost, supposedly dead relative on the street. Joyous, but disconcerting, like seeing a ghost of my former self, my former life. I felt foolish, of course, for not looking in the pocket, foolish for caring so much about a piece of chenille. Yes, I was happy to have my hat back, but I wasn't sure I wanted to go through the heartbreak of loving it again. I put the hat on, but scrupulously avoided looking at myself in the mirror. It was just a hat. Now I look in sporting goods stores casually, not desperately. I try on hats and tell myself you see? This is a fine hat. If you ever lose the hat, you can always pick up this rag wool hat for \$6.99. It will be spring soon, I tell myself and the hat, I won't need you anymore. The hat knows better. It cradles my head gently, lovingly. I will never let you get hypothermia, it tells me, or frostbite. Love me and I will never let you go.

On Vacation With The Great Scientist



1. The Great Scientist on the Plane

The Great Scientist has brought too much luggage again. Her husband, the Great Scientist's Assistant, has already filled two overhead compartments with the Great Scientist's luggage and is trying to force the remaining bag under the seat in front of him. A passenger nearby complains to a stewardess that she cannot fit her carry-on anywhere, because "that bearded man used up all the space." The stewardess nods sharply and grabs the suitcase from the woman's hands. The Great Scientist slinks down in her seat.

"Perhaps I did not need to bring all three Einstein biographies," she says. Her husband nods. "But," she says, "one can never have too much reading material." The Great Scientist has timed herself, and she reads between ninety-seven and one-hundred sixty-four pages per hour, depending, as she would be quick to point out, on the number of words per page and the difficulty of the prose.

The Great Scientist looks out the window at the wing and grips the armrests as the plane accelerates for take-off. "I understand the Bernoulli principle," she says, "but somehow I can't quite believe the decrease in pressure of a moving gas as its velocity increases is enough to make this plane fly." Her husband points out that her faith is not required to keep them in the air.

2. The Great Scientist at the Hotel

The Great Scientist searches for the swimming pool. “Now,” she says to her husband, noting vaguely that he does not look right in turquoise swim trunks, “we must consider the options systematically. The heuristic of trying the staircases we think most likely to lead to the pool, has failed. Thus, we should start with the nearest staircase and work our way clockwise until we find the pool.”

After tromping up and down three more staircases, the assistant begins to complain. “Can’t we just ask someone?” he says. The Great Scientist does not reply. Finally, bitter and sweating, they stumble to the lobby and reach the door to the pool. The Great Scientist realizes she has forgotten to change into her swimwuit. It does not matter. The pool is closed.

“It is not our fault,” says the Great Scientist, as they try to find their way back to their room. “The design of this hotel is not ergodynamic.”

3. The Great Scientist Eats Breakfast

The Great Scientist and her husband have both ordered fruit muffins for their complimentary continental breakfast. She wonders Do they eat muffins on the continent? When the tray arrives, the two of them sit on the bed to eat, the

Great Scientist using the night stand as a table. The Great Scientist takes a bite of her muffin. "It doesn't taste like fruit," she says, pulling a long fiber of plant material from her mouth. She inspects it, puts it back in her mouth, and declares it zucchini. "I would call this a vegetable muffin," she says, placing the muffin on the plate and putting her elbows on the night stand to get a better look.

The Great Scientist's Assistant, who used to be a biologist, interrupts. "Zucchini's do have seeds," he says, "they are technically fruits."

"You have a point," she says, chin in hand, gazing at her muffin dreamily. "But, from a nutritional standpoint, a zucchini, like an eggplant or a cucumber, is considered a vegetable." She takes another bite, and puts the muffin down. "It has pistachios," she says. "Is that appropriate?"

Her husband inspects his own muffin. "This is California," he says, "anything is appropriate."

4. The Great Scientist Observes a Bird

A bird perched on a branch at eye level, with its white tail and red crown, attracts the Great Scientist's attention. The bird seems to be observing the Great Scientist while the Great Scientist observes the bird. They stand, eyes locked. The Great Scientist wonders what the bird could be thinking. The bird begins to make strangled clicking sounds. The Scientist, eyes wide, moves closer. The Great Scientist's Assistant begins to back away.

"That bird sounds upset," he says. The Great Scientist motions him to be quiet. The clicking sounds turn to a grating ratchet, such a loud sound to be coming from such a small bird. The bird rocks on its perch. The Great

Scientist's Assistant moves further out of harm's way. "Please," he says to the Great Scientist, "don't disturb the bird any further."

"I am not disturbing, I am observing," the Great Scientist says, her head inches from the bird's beak. The bird swoops from the branch and dives toward the Great Scientist's head, shrieking as it grazes the Great Scientist's cheek. The Great Scientist shrieks as well, crouching on the ground and covering her head with her arms until the bird flies away. The Great Scientist stands up, fluffs her hair with her fingers.

"That bird," she says, "has no respect for the scientific method."

5. The Great Scientist at the Beach.

The Great Scientist distrusts sunscreen. "I'm just not sure," she says, watching the couple in front of her smother their young son in S.P.F. 45, "about skin contact with concentrated amounts of ethylhexyl on a regular basis." The Great Scientist stands up and begins pacing in the sand, heel to toe, heel to toe. She does this for several minutes. A teenage boy with headphone like antennae stares at her. She is measuring her shadow. She sits down on her towel, mumbling to herself. "It's an S.P.F. of twelve," she says, "so I think we should be all right for an hour or so." She removes her shoes, and carefully places her watch in the toe of the left one, then laces up the shoe. She runs to the water and launches herself into the waves, forgetting entirely about her glasses, which float out of her sight sadly. The Great Scientist, chagrined and legally blind, stands on the beach and tries not to cry.

Saturday Morning at the Zoo



They were trying to decide if they should have another child. It was strange to say *they*, when of course it was only she who was going to give birth--to actually *have the child* inside of her. Jenna thought Lisette, who was a year and a half, needed a companion. Cal had no opinion on the subject, except that if they were going to have another child, he didn't want to adopt again, he wanted them to have a natural baby. They'd discussed it last night. Oh, Jenna said, Lisette isn't natural? You're saying something is wrong with her? No, Cal said, no, she's just fine. I just want us to have a child together. Jenna said why go through all that when there are Romanian babies who need homes.

They were at the zoo, the three of them, even though it was really too cold to be outside for long. Most of the animals were inside, except for the elephants, plodding sadly around their small, dusty enclosure, and the penguins, of course, who loved the cold and squawked and flapped their stunted wings at the few flakes of snow. Jenna pushed the stroller past the empty giraffe display. The giraffes were inside, but it made Jenna sad to see them there, so tall their horns threatened to graze the ceiling. Jenna used to love the giraffes best of all the zoo animals--she'd stare at them long after her sisters had wandered away, waiting for them to make a sound.

They passed by the otter display, but the otters were nowhere to be seen. The zoo was slowly updating from small, confined cages to more open habitats. The otters had a nice big pool with a waterfall and water slide, and rocks to sun themselves on. Jenna wondered where the otters went when it was too cold

for them to be outside. Did they have an indoor pool, or did they just dive deep in the pool where it was warmer?

"My grandmother had an abortion," Jenna announced, out of nowhere. "I mean, not recently, it was during World War II, before she had my father. She said she didn't want to bring a child into this world."

Cal grunted in response, crunching ice from his snow cone. It was the wrong season for snow cones, but Lisette had begged and screamed and kicked for one so Cal bought it for her before she could get out of the stroller and throw herself on the ground for a full-blown tantrum. Lisette had taken a few bites of the ice and declared it "bad cold," so Cal was finishing it, crunching the ice loudly. The cone was all-American: red, blue, and white.

Cal finished the sno-cone and took the stroller. By the elephant enclosure a man was talking to one elephant in a weird, high tone.

"Who's pretty?" he was saying, "Are you my pretty girl?"

"What is it about animals?" Jenna asked Cal. "Why are we so fascinated by them?"

Cal shrugged. "They remind us that we're human," he said.

"Bears!" Lisette said, "bears bears bears bears bear."

They were passing the polar bear exhibit, so Cal stopped and unstrapped Lisette from the stroller. She scurried to the railing and stuck her head under it.

"Winnie-The-Pooh," she said. Jenna was concerned about Lisette because she didn't talk as much as the other 18 month-olds in her play group, but Cal told her not to worry about it. He didn't talk until he was twelve, he told her. Just didn't have anything to say until then.

The bear was pacing up and down its rocky home, walking rhythmically, mechanically, as if asleep or hypnotized. At the end of each lap, just before it turned around, it stood on its hind legs and let out a dreadful sound, a cross between a howl and a wail, starting out low and rumbling, then rising in pitch and tone until it ended in an unearthly squawk. The sound was mesmerizing, and the three of them stood listening, transfixed.

"What is it doing?" a small voice said, and Jenna looked at Lisette. That was the longest sentence Lisette had ever said.

"Cal," Jenna said, "Cal, did you hear that?" Cal was down the railing a bit, still staring at the polar bear intently.

Jenna knelt down in front of Lisette, and held her hands.

"Say that again," Jenna said, "say 'what is it doing?'" Lisette said nothing, looking up at the pale gray sky. Jenna dropped her hands and stood up, and Lisette turned back to the bear.

"C'mon," Jenna said, "let's go see the other bears." Cal and Lisette stood there, mouths open a bit, and Jenna realized how much they resembled each other. They could have been blood relations. Jenna turned away, pushing the stroller absently. It was weightless, without Lisette in it, and it made Jenna feel light too.

The night she and Cal had met she'd told him she didn't want to have children.

"I wouldn't want to pass my traits on to anyone," she'd said. "I'm afraid of how they'll turn out."

He nodded. "I just worry they'll be ugly."

Jenna laughed. Cal certainly wasn't beautiful, with a nose too big for his face and milky-brown eyes, but Jenna didn't think he was ugly. Besides, she liked unbeautiful people--she felt she could trust them. Now, though, she wasn't sure. She worried that initial conversation, the one she'd staked so much on, the one that convinced her Cal was the right man to marry because he wanted children and was happy to adopt, had been a lie. He'd just said then, and later, when they talked about it, that he was happy to adopt because he thought that's what she wanted to hear. He hadn't meant it. But then, she hadn't told him the truth either. She'd said she was worried about overpopulation, didn't think they should contribute. He agreed. But really, she was selfish. She was trying to avoid pain. She'd always been afraid of pain, had gone to great lengths to avoid it. When she was ten her greatest fear was getting a shot. She knew that when she was fifteen she would have to get a tetanus shot and she daydreamed about how she could get through that time without experiencing the pain. She thought maybe she could make a part of herself turn off, sort of like going to sleep, so she could wake up later with that day in her life over. When she learned about sex, and childbirth, she decided she wanted to skip over those times as well. From the little she understood from books and her parents, sex was unpleasant and painful and childbirth, everyone agreed, was absolutely excruciating. If she could just go to sleep at twenty and wake up at twenty-seven with three smiling, happy children.

Jenna looked up. Cal had skipped the brown and black bears and was far ahead, entering the big cat house. Lisette was sitting in the stroller, leaning her head back to stare at Jenna with big round eyes. Jenna began pushing the stroller gingerly. She hoped Cal would come out before she got there. She had

nightmares about lions, and to see them alive, face to face, was like her own seething unconscious presented to her behind bars. She'd read somewhere that dreaming of wild animals means you are afraid of your own emotions, but Jenna didn't have any truck with Freudian interpretation. When she dreamt about wild animals it was because she was afraid of wild animals, just like she dreamt about bathrooms because she needed to go to the bathroom. And last night, she'd dreamt about being in labor, walking up and down fluorescent lit white and green hallways in such pain she thought her body would split open. Not much to interpret there.

She didn't tell Cal about the dream. He'd just tell her what he'd told her the night before, that he didn't want to have another child unless it was their own. Jenna had called him selfish. Isn't Lissette our own, she said. Yes, he'd said, you know what I mean. So many couples want to have children and can't, we can and you won't. Yes, she'd said, I won't. It's just that I think a child of ours would have such great genes, he said. Are you saying there's something wrong with Lizzie? I don't know, he said, she's kind of- There's nothing wrong with Lizzie, she said, Lizzie is perfect, OK? Maybe you have a problem, he'd said calmly, next to her in the dark, he on top of the blanket, she under it. She was always cold. Maybe you should see someone about this. I think you have some sort of fixation. She sat straight up in bed, blood swirling to her face, and screamed at him--I don't want to be ripped open by an eight-pound body and you think there's something wrong with me? How would you like it, huh? You want to be pregnant, you want to go through worse pain than anything short of getting a limb sawed off by a rusty bread knife? She swung and punched him in the stomach, not hard enough but still, and then she got out of bed and went to

the bathroom and sat on the toilet, staring at her knees and gasping for breath. Something wrong with me, she repeated, I'll show him something fucking wrong with me.

She stopped outside the big cat house and leaned against the brick wall.

"Inside?" Lisette asked. Jenna shook her head. She peered through the glass doors, and could just make out one hulking figure pacing in the cage. The other cage was empty. They never mixed lions and tigers. Jenna wondered what would happen if they did.

Cal opened the door and Jenna jumped back, almost knocking over the stroller.

"Inside?" Lisette said to Cal.

"C'mon," Cal said, holding out his hand. Jenna clutched the handles of the stroller, shook her head.

"Don't be scared, Jenna," Cal said. "No lions, just a tiger."

"Tiger," Lisette said. "Grrrr."

Cal held the door open while Jenna wheeled the stroller through. She closed her eyes as soon as she got in the door, steeling herself for the encounter. She breathed shallowly, trying not to take in too much of the musky scent. She opened her eyes and looked up at the cage, on a platform ten or twelve feet off the ground. The tiger slunk from one edge of the cage to the other, silent on its huge, padded paws. It paused mid-step, one leg up, tail low and twitching. It turned its shaggy head toward them, looking past them at some point over their heads with calm yellow-green eyes.

Lisette clambered out of the stroller and grasped the railing, gazing up at the tiger. As it turned, beginning its circuit once more, Lisette stretched up her hands toward it. "Tiger," she said.

"Lisette!" Jenna said, "stay away." She reached over the stroller and picked Lisette up, backing away from the cage. The tiger hadn't wavered from its path.

Cal told her she was being ridiculous, scaring Lisette for no reason.

"That cat doesn't even know we're here," he said.

"It's a predator," Jenna said. Lisette wriggled out of her arms and ran over to stand by Cal. "In the wild it would eat something like Lisette."

"I don't think it would, anymore, even if it could. It's lost all its instincts. Look at it."

Jenna looked. The tiger was still pacing and although it looked terrible, wild, she could see that below the matted orange fur it was nothing; its only power came from within her, her own fear, while the animal itself was only a shell.

The three of them left the cat house and walked down the path to the primate house. The primate house was new, a low, brick building. Jenna braced herself for the smell as she walked in, but the air was light and odorless.

The beige walls were clean and bright, and large signs told them about the orangutans they would see. They followed the yellow painted footprints on the grey carpet around the corner. In front of them only a large pane of glass, stretching 15 feet from floor to ceiling and 30 feet from end to end, separated them from the orangutans. It wasn't like a cage, it didn't seem to be keeping them inside, it just seemed that the orangutans were on one side of the glass

and the three of them on the other. One of the orangutans was asleep in the corner on a pile of hay, but the other was gathering up the rest of the hay in the enclosure and scattering it exuberantly. The three of them inched closer to the glass. The orangutan stopped playing with the hay and looked straight at them. Unlike the tiger, it seemed to be staring Jenna right in the eye. The orangutan's mahogany eyes, with a thin ring of white around the iris, made it look human. It did look, as the signs indicated it would, like a person in a red suit. Jenna saw it had something in its left hand, something glittering metal. Cal moved closer to the glass and the orangutan did also, until the two of them were less than a foot apart. The orangutan pressed its face against the glass so its lips were squashed in an odd but friendly grimace. Cal put both hands on the glass, and the orangutan did the same. Then Cal started tapping on the glass and the orangutan followed the same rhythm, hands in fists.

Jenna noticed a hairline crack in the glass but before she could say anything her vision was fragmented. She backed away and all she knew was glass shattering, screams, Cal still standing, dazed, with a chunk of glass in his forehead, before crumpling dramatically to the ground as an alarm sounded somewhere, distant, piercing. And when it was all over, when the ambulance had come and Jenna had watched while Cal was put on the stretcher and one of the E.M.T.'s had taken pity on her terrified face and said he'll be all right, it's a superficial wound, she said to herself, so, this is life. This is what I've been afraid of all this time.

She picked up Lisette, who was sucking on an index finger, eyes large and crazed. "It's all right," Jenna said, feeling Laurette's shuddery breathing against her chest.

“I don’t want to see any more animals,” Lisette said, the words clear though muffled by the finger in her mouth.

“No,” Jenna agreed. “No more animals.”

Left Behind



My twin sister's name is Amalia, and I often wonder if that is why she ran away. In Sarlan, the language Amalia and I invented when we were five, Amalia meant run. Of course, Amalia meant run because Amalia loved to run, so running was already a part of her and would have been forever, whether the word for run in Sarlan was Amalia or not. Still, every time we used the word Amalia to mean run, we strengthened the association, just as we strengthened the bond between us by talking in secret. Later, when our younger sister Laurel was old enough to talk, we taught her our secret language. Laurel never became a fluent speaker, although she talked faster than Amalia and I put together. She mixed words up, substituting an English word if she needed to, but Amalia and I didn't mind, even though we would never mix English and Sarlan. For us, they existed in entirely different planes which ran parallel and could never meet. If we needed a new word we invented it on the spot, and the other instantly knew what it meant, although Laurel had to be told. For Amalia and I Sarlan was as good as silence. It was the language of the heart. Laurel and I would sit on the porch steps and watch Amalia tear through the dandelions, shrieking.

"Amalia amalia laurel noholo," I would say to Laurel, which meant Amalia runs faster than anyone.

Our parents worried about us when we were little, because we spoke haltingly to them, and we wouldn't talk to any of the other kids in preschool. They took us to a speech therapist, who listened to us talk in Sarlan together.

Later, after Amalia left, my parents told me the speech therapist said they could go two ways. They could separate us as much as possible, make sure we never spoke Sarlan when were together, or they could treat us normally and hope we grew out of it.

Amalia got up early every morning, to race in the dark pre-dawn. I could hear her lace up her running shoes as I lay in half-sleep, and the zip of her windbreaker as she pulled it over her head. In my dreams I ran with her over frozen dirt and sidewalks lined with trees and crusted snow. I felt her gasping to pull air into her lungs. Later, she shook me awake to join her for the second half of her run. One morning, we ran further than usual, out past the school and beyond, where cornfields turned to prairie grasses. The butterfly weeds weren't blooming yet, but a monarch fluttered between us. The sun peeked over the horizon and she shaded her eyes with her hand. I closed my eyes but still the bright spot of the sun burned through my lids. I opened my eyes and looked at Amalia. "All pickles dar," she said. We didn't speak in our secret language anymore, except for important matters when we were alone, or in whispers when we didn't want other people to understand. Amalia meant she wanted to do big things. Pickles meant big because our favorite book when we were inventing our language was about Pickles the fire cat, who had big paws and wanted to do big things. He made his home in a barrel and chased little cats up trees, until the fire department adopted him, and he helped fight fires. I wasn't sure what big things Amalia wanted to do, but I trusted that she would do them.

At school that day, Amalia had so much energy she could barely contain herself in study hall. She wriggled in her seat like a silverfish. Finally she asked

the teacher if she could go to the bathroom and then she went out and ran around the building. I could feel her running, my heart rate rising with hers, until my cheeks tingled and I had to suck in air through my mouth.

Brian tapped me on the shoulder. "Are you okay?" he asked. Brian paid too much attention to me. He always noticed when I wasn't doing my homework, or when Amalia and I talked in secret. I told Amalia that I thought he suspected something, he watched me so closely, and Amalia said he doesn't suspect anything, he has a crush on you.. Amalia always picked up on the subtleties of human behavior.

I told Brian to be quiet, I was studying.

"Your face is all red," he said. "Are you sick? Do you want me to take you to the nurse?"

I told him I appreciated his concern but if he didn't shut up I would have to mutilate him severely in some unspeakable way. He turned back to his chemistry book, but looked at me out of the corner of his eye. I swiveled in my chair and narrowed my eyes at him, flaring my nostrils. Outside, Amalia had stopped running; I could breathe again. "You're very threatening," Brian whispered. "I'm scared." He held his hands out to show me they weren't shaking. I picked up my pencil and tried to concentrate on my math.

If Joe mowed the lawn in two hours, and Bill mowed the lawn in one hour, how long would it take them to mow the lawn together?

Are they using one lawn mower or two? Why does it take Joe so much longer than Bill? Is Joe lazy? Or is Joe working as fast as he can, he just isn't in very good shape, or maybe his mower doesn't work as well? Were they timed on the same lawn? Would Bill have felt bad that he worked faster than Joe, maybe

slowed down his pace a tad out of sympathy? That's what I would do. When Amalia came back to study hall she wasn't out of breath. She slid into her seat behind me.

At track practice Amalia and I milled around with the others, stretching and walking to warm up. Most of the girls kept a safe distance from Amalia, tracing a charmed circle around her that no one entered except me. She sat on the wet grass, her right leg out in front, her head bent over so far her nose brushed her knee. Her leg was tanned and poised, perfectly muscled. Her short curls almost touched the ground, and I fingered my own long hair. Amalia had shaved her head when we started ninth grade, to help people tell us apart. Some people still mixed us up, but I think it was intentional. Even when we'd dress identically when we were little, Amalia had a look in her eye, a tension to her jaw, that I lacked entirely. The boys stretched in their own clump, ignoring the girls, except for Brian who watched Amalia and me as if we might turn into witches and fly off in a flurry of broomsticks at any moment.

The coach walked over and addressed us as a group. "We're going to win the meet next week," he said, "as soon as we get that relay down." Amalia rolled her eyes and exhaled loudly. Amalia, Sandy, Regan and Kate positioned themselves on the track. Kate ran the first 100 meters, handed the baton to Regan, who handed it to Sandy. Sandy ran with her eyes closed, arms pumping, but opened her eyes right before she got to Amalia. Amalia started to run, reaching out for the baton, but just before she grasped larger end, Sandy let go, and the baton tumbled to the ground.

"Sandy," the coach said, jogging over to them. "You've still got the timing wrong."

Sandy shrugged, chewing on a fingernail. "All right," the coach said, blowing his whistle, "let's try that one again." The four of them ran the track again and again, but each time Sandy and Amalia failed to connect. I watched closely as Sandy let go just an instant too soon. It was intentional, I could tell, and Amalia knew it too. Each time the baton fell and bounced once, then lay dead. Coach Lapham studied his notebook, decided to switch Regan and Sandy, but Regan did the same thing. There was nothing Amalia could do.

"At least we've isolated the problem," the coach said, looking at Amalia. She narrowed her eyes at Regan and Sandy, but said nothing. The rest of us tried to look busy, hurling the discus, doing sit-ups, but we were all fascinated by the human drama on the track. Amalia was the fastest runner on the team, faster even than most of the boys. In fall she trained with the boys for cross-country, but in the spring we all practiced together. I watched Amalia out there on the track, all her muscles clenched in determination, and I felt rage flowing through her, rage like nothing I had ever felt on my own.

Amalia was quiet at dinner that night, so Laurel talked even more than usual.

"Slow down," my mother said, spooning green beans onto her plate. "I can't understand a word you're saying."

Laurel could only speak quickly, otherwise she'd lose momentum and forget what she was going to say. "Laurel sarah mehano no trans andrea," Laurel said, speaking in Sarlan to make Amalia and me laugh.

"Have patience, mother, I speak quickly because I have a lot to say," I said, translating for my mother's benefit. She smiled, but her eyes drooped. She was tired from working all day and worried that her three daughters were

insane. Sarlan couldn't be translated into English perfectly, it had too many connotations. Many of our words were names, after our preschool class. Andrea meant mother, after the little girl in our class who carried a Raggedy Anne doll everywhere. Sarah meant patience. That's me.

"When is Dad coming back?" I asked. Our father was in Vietnam again. He was doing research on breast cancer.

"Tomorrow night," my mother said, starting to clear the table. I stood up to help, Amalia slipped out of her chair and ran up to her room. I grabbed Laurel's plate, distracted, but Laurel pulled it back. She said she was still eating, and when I looked down at her half-full plate I realized she'd hardly eaten a thing. She'd been talking too much.

"What's wrong with Amalia?" my mother asked as I crammed plates into the dishwasher. She had soap bubbles in her hair and I swished them away before I answered.

"We had a hard day at school," I said. She nodded, knowing that by "we" I meant "Amalia," by "at school" I mean "with the other kids." "She's the fastest at the one hundred, so Coach Lapham wants her to anchor the relay," I explained, "but they won't pass the baton to her."

My mother turned back to the sink, considering. She didn't know what to do about Amalia either. When my mother finished pots and pans I started the dishwasher, and she put her arm around me.

"You can't keep her from getting hurt," she said. "I know it hurts you to watch her, but she's got to find her own way. I don't know what to do about Laurel either." She sat down at the kitchen table, and I sat too. "She can't seem to get along with anyone in her class. She talks too much, I guess, and tells

everyone what to do.” Laurel was in sixth grade, and I knew she’d have to learn she couldn’t boss everyone around. “You’re my normal daughter,” my mother said, her arm around my shoulder again.

On my way upstairs I thought about Amalia. I could see her sitting on her bed, legs crossed, in front of her portable computer. “Notes on the Revolution,” the file was titled. She’d been working on it for months. “Some people,” she is writing, “need a partial lobotomy. Or perhaps a full lobotomy. Can you imagine Sandy trying to run after having her frontal lobe removed?”

I hesitated in front of Amalia's door, listening to the rapid click of keys as she typed. It sounded like Morse code, a message for me to interpret, but I didn't know what the dots and dashes meant. I closed my eyes and tried to picture the computer scan, and although it wavered clearly in the purple black darkness I couldn't make out the words. I had always been able to see Amalia, wherever she was and whatever she was doing, if I closed my eyes and concentrated hard enough, but lately I'd been losing her. I knocked softly on the oak door, loudly enough for her to hear but softly enough that she could ignore me and pretend she hadn't heard.

“What,” she said, her voice muffled but clearly irritated through the heavy door. I opened the door just wide enough to stick my head in.

“Can I come in?” I asked.

“Don't you have homework to do?” she asked, not even turning around.

“You could just say no, Amalia,” I said.

“No what?”

“No, I can’t come in.”

“No,” she repeated, “no, you can’t come in.” I shut the door and leaned against it. I knew she was leaving. The connection was strong enough still for me to know that.

I wanted to say to her why don’t you just go? I couldn’t imagine leaving Sun Prairie, but I’m not Amalia. She really was like Pickles the Fire Cat. The kind of person she was, she couldn’t live in a barrel on an empty lot, and that’s what Sun Prairie was. It’s a beautiful town, on the edge of the world with the only native prairie left in Wisconsin stretching out to the west, but like Amalia always says, to stop beating your head against a brick wall isn’t giving up, it’s making a good decision.

The Undiscovered Country



My mother thinks about death a lot now that my grandmother is sick, and when her friend Carol's husband died, and the next day Carol had to go to the cemetery and argue with her step-daughter over where he should be buried, my mother decided it was time to buy some graves. We went to the cemetery in December, when the air was dense with snow that would not fall. We walked from the office to the Jewish part of the cemetery, and my mother talked to the guy about size and number of plots. They could buy either a space for three plots or a space for four plots. My mother said she wanted to look at some of both, and I shivered, and wondered who she pictured buried in that extra grave.

The cold air was so clear I could see the names on every headstone even across the road over the hill and beyond, and the accumulation of all those souls weighed on me, dragging me down until I sank to my knees. The snow sparkled in a thin sheen on the grass, seeping into my jeans and then my skin. My legs numbed into icicles that could no longer hold my weight, and I sank further to the ground, hugged the wet earth. I thought of the bodies below me, each in a different stage of decay, and I wondered what they would look like when they all rose from their graves as they would in the resurrection, when the messiah came and all the dead would rise again and dance down the empty streets and rise, and rise.

I had told my mother earlier that I didn't want to be buried, I wanted to be cremated and my ashes spread across the endless ocean, the light glinting

off whitecaps, but she said that was not traditional because then I could not rise, and when the messiah came I would be left behind, my soul alone and bodiless among the joyful multitudes who had each found themselves again, found a finger and toe and hair upon their heads, no longer decayed but whole and smelling of new life and pine needles and vanilla,

So I waited while the man paced off the bravesites, the graysites, the gravesites, and my parents considered near the tree? up on the hill? not too near the road. And I wandered, and looked at the stones on the headstones, placed in remembrance, or sorrow.

As my mother and father zeroed in on the four-plot site they wanted I wanted to tell them how many graves and how many times do I have to tell you I don't want to die and if I do, I don't want to be buried. I don't want to lie in the cold dark earth and rot day by day, and I don't want you to either. I refuse to come to the graveyard (*cemetary*, my mother says), and kneel before your tombstone (headstone, she says) and wonder exactly what state of decay you are in, whether a scrap of flesh remains on your bones or if the wood of the coffin has decayed as well. And what if the coffin is not wood? What if your body does not decay? These are not things I want to think about. Death is one thing, death of the soul and the body, but decay is something much more sinister and unnatural. No, decay is natural, but the awareness of decay, the flowers, yearly, on the grave, paying tribute to the empty shell when the soul has gone--where?--or perhaps the soul doesn't exist at all but if it does exist, persist, it is anywhere, everywhere except in that coffin in the grave beneath that tombstone. It lingers in the air, fills the sky with perfume, lodges, a familiar and welcome guest in my heart and the book of my memory. Dig me no grave, sing

me no hymns, but let me die and leave this earth silently, without a ripple or a splash.

Hawaiian Snow



Honolulu

Sun on the treetops turn palms needles to blades of light, and a man in a navy-blue jumpsuit flip-flops across the parking lot, eyes me suspiciously. I hear the swish of a broom below and the hum of air-conditioners. The man in navy shuffles back into view but now he is wearing black rubber boots. He turns the water on with a squeal and hoses down the cement pool area. Birds call and a car eases over a speed bump on the street to my left. Airlane takes off with a roar, nose up.

The air, thick and humid, smells faintly of hibiscus, and in the lobby a few wooden totem poles gimace at me. A woman in the laundry room opposite swipes at the wall with a broom.

Hanalei

A white light fills the treetops--mist, and a promise of more to come. In the dawn darkness, flowers bloom quietly and birds wait for first light to whistle mournful songs. The murmur of the surf grows to a roar and ebbs, harmonizing with the sound of shower water, my father in the shower, my mother brushing her teeth, my sister playing with the glass doors leading to the porch.

A nice day today, my mother says, although the waves breaking sound like rain, and the screens are splattered with water. The light on the clouds is like God's own hand touching all of us and the palm fronds are bent back like they might snap and the hibiscus are bowing as the waves rush to meet the shore. The coconut palms sway dangerously on one spindly leg, so fragile with their skinny trunk and wild blossom of fronds springing like curls from their head, or like hands on a clock pointing to island time.

The wind picks up. This is no island breeze, it can bend palm fronds double before ripping them off, stir the ocean into a frenzy of murky surf, drag wicker chairs across the lawn and into the pool, rip flowers off branches and branches off trees.

I'm still on the porch writing postcards when my father, who has never written a postcard in his life, comes out and looks over my shoulder admiringly. "He who writes postcards has friends," my father declares. He means she.

Waimeia

Driving here in the rented car my father peered down signless roads and turned to my mother with the map. "Are we still on the way to where we're going?" We were. When we arrived I was so delighted with the cottage I pretended to be a tiger to make my sister laugh.

"I'm a tiger. Roar." I tried to eat her bed, and she giggled, so I pretended to eat the bed again, opening my mouth as wide as it would go. "If I eat your whole bed you can have mine," I said.

"Then where are you going to sleep?" she asked.

"If I eat your whole bed," I told her, "I won't be sleeping."

Now my father comes out on the lanai of our cottage before dawn, sees that I am already there. "Do we declare it morning?" he asks. Last time we were here, 22 years ago, it was mourning. My grandfather had died six months before and we were in Hawaii with my grandmother to remember, to forget, to remember. The surf pounded just as it does now and the clouds swirled purple just as magnificently, I suppose. I do not remember. I was just a year old, crawling and staining my knees with red dirt, my mother says. I do not remember any of it--not my grandfather, not his death, not my grandmother's sorrow. My earliest memory of my grandmother she is happy when we wake up early and crawl into bed with her, my younger sister and I. She tells us stories of the war, and before the war, and we listen and wonder.

The sun shines hotly before the wind comes up, and the purple clouds lower. My sister comes out in her pajamas to have a look at the day.

"It's windy, overcast, *and* rainy?" she asks.

"What more could you ask for?" I say. "You were hoping for thunder perhaps? A tsunami or two? Roar." She goes back inside to find a sweater.